

ALFRED
HITCHCOCK's
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

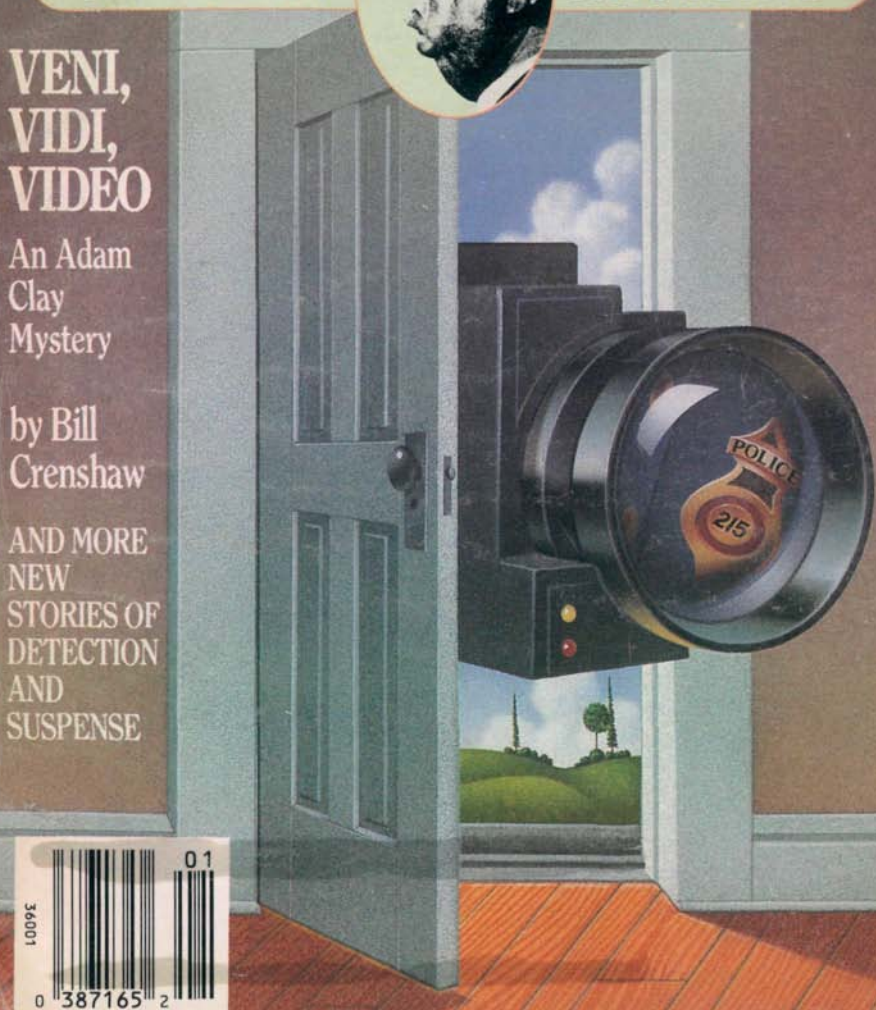
January, 1990 \$2.00 U.S./\$2.50 Can.

**VENI,
VIDI,
VIDEO**

An Adam
Clay
Mystery

by Bill
Crenshaw

AND MORE
NEW
STORIES OF
DETECTION
AND
SUSPENSE

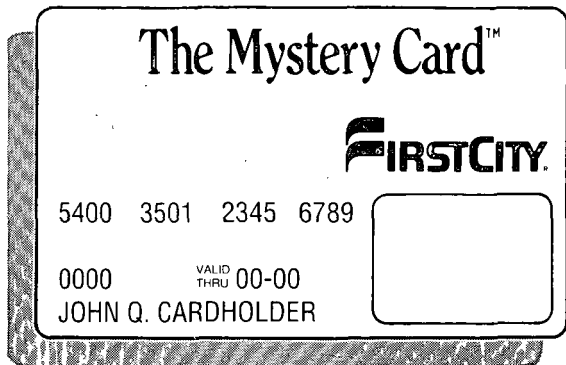


LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Take the Mystery

Out of Credit Cards

With the First Credit Card for Mystery Readers!



As a reader of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* you enjoy red herrings, twisted endings, and the surprises that make mystery reading such a pleasure. But no one likes to be surprised in areas of personal finance.

With all the confusion surrounding credit cards these days...interest rates, grace periods, and other details...we're pleased that First City is offering a MasterCard to our readers that will not require you to hire a private investigator, or an attorney, to help you decipher the benefits.

"The Mystery Card"

The unique gothic mansion design expresses your interest in finding clues and solving mysteries.

Your use of "The Mystery Card" will help

solve one of the major medical mysteries of our time...the cure for diabetes.

Every time you buy anything with "The Mystery Card," *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* will contribute a percentage of the price to the pioneering medical research of the **Juvenile Diabetes Foundation**.

Diabetes is a metabolic disorder that adversely affects the body's capacity to produce and use insulin, a hormone necessary for the conversion of food into energy. Approximately one out of every twenty Americans suffers from the disease. And, there is no cure.

Your use of "The Mystery Card" can help the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation discover the clue to the cure of diabetes!

Take the Mystery Out of Credit Cards

and put "The Mystery Card" in your pocket.

"The Mystery Card" is a MasterCard accepted by six million MasterCard merchants worldwide. There's no mystery about its value.

- There's no annual fee for one full year!
- A competitive variable interest rate of prime plus 7.7%.
- 25-day interest-free grace period on purchases when your balance is paid in

full each month.

- Instant Cash at ATMs and bank locations throughout the world.
- \$250,000 Travel Accident Insurance at no extra cost.

AND

- Exclusive discounts on mystery books and related merchandise.

First City MasterCard

Terms and Conditions

Annual Percentage Rate for Purchases	17.7%
Variable Rate Information	Your Annual Percentage Rate may vary. The rate is determined by adding 7.7% to the Prime Rate listed in the "Money Section" of the first <i>Wall Street Journal</i> published after the 15th of the month preceding the first day of the billing cycle. As of 8/4/89 the rate as determined by this formula would be 18.7%. Under this offer, a maximum rate of 17.7% is guaranteed through 12/30/89.
Grace Period for Repayment of Balances for Purchases	You have 25 days after the statement date to repay your balance before a finance charge on purchases will be imposed.
Method of Computing the Balance for Purchases	Average Daily Balance (including new transactions) method.
Annual Fees	Membership fee: \$20.00 per year. Under this offer, the Annual Fee will be waived the first year. At the beginning of the second year, the Annual Fee will be billed to your account automatically.
Minimum Finance Charge	None
Transaction Fee For Purchases	None
Transaction Fee for Cash Advances: \$1.50 Late Payment Fee: \$15.00 Over-the-Credit-Limit Fee: \$15.00	
The disclosures above are accurate as of the date of printing on 8/4/89. These terms are subject to change after this date. Call First City Bank-Sioux Falls, N.A. at 1-800-641-7878 for any changes in the terms disclosed.	



First City Bank - Sioux Falls, N.A.
 If you would like an application,
 please call (800) 641-7878.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
 ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CONTENTS



SHORT STORIES

THE CHRISTMAS BEAR by Herbert Resnicow	6
TWIST OF FATE by Arthur Lyons	20
MY TROUBLE by Molly MacRae	44
SINGAPORE ASSASSIN by Ross McCauley	50
VENI, VIDI, VIDEO by Bill Crenshaw	60
THREE MEN IN A TUB by Lemuel Cork	102
HOROWITZ AND THE BOTTLE OF KET HUP by D. D. Dunnom	112
THE THING UNDER THE BED by Lane Olinghouse	122

MYSTERY CLASSIC

THE HEDGE BETWEEN by Charlotte Armstrong	125
---	------------

DEPARTMENTS

EDITOR'S NOTES	4
THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH	59
UNSOLVED by Lawrence Treat	100
SOLUTION TO THE WINTER DOUBLE ISSUE "UNSOLVED"	121
BOOKED & PRINTED by Carol Harper	150
MURDER BY DIRECTION by William Heller	153
THE STORY THAT WON	155

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 35, No. 1, January, 1990. Published every 28 days with two issues combined at year end, by Davis Publications, Inc., \$2.00 per copy in the U.S.A. \$2.50 in Canada. Annual subscription 14 issues for \$27.97 in the U.S.A. and possessions; \$31.50 elsewhere payable in advance in U.S. funds. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Editorial and Executive Offices, 380 Lexington Ave., N.Y., N.Y. 10017. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 7055, Red Oak, Iowa 51591. Second class postage paid at New York, N.Y., and at additional mailing office. Canadian 3rd class postage paid at Windsor, Ontario; © 1989 by Davis Publications, Inc., all rights reserved. The stories in this magazine are all fictitious, and any resemblance between the characters in them and actual persons is completely coincidental. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Printed in U.S.A. All submissions must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelope; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 7055, Red Oak, Iowa 51591. In Canada return to 1801 South Cameron, Windsor, Ontario, N9B 3E1.

ISSN: 0002-5224

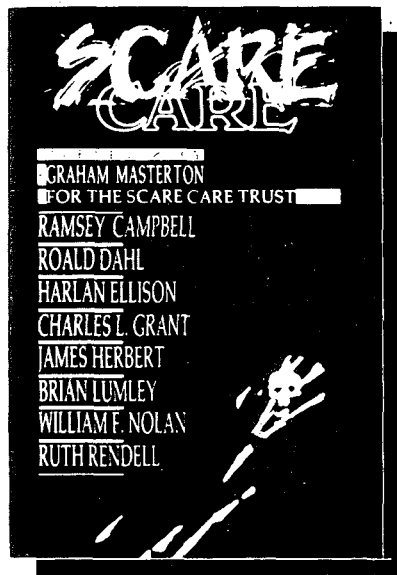
Cover by Theo Rudnak

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Horror's most visionary writers contribute their talents to help children everywhere.

SCARE CARE

EDITED BY GRAHAM MASTERTON
FOR THE SCARE CARE TRUST



If SCARE CARE had only been an anthology of remarkable horror stories by the finest writers in the field, it would have been a milestone. It includes over three dozen harrowing new tales by such writers as Ramsey Campbell, Harlan Ellison, Roald Dahl, James Herbert and Charles L. Grant.

But SCARE CARE is far more than that. It's a special benefit edition to aid the Scare Care Trust, an organization dedicated to raising money to help abused and needy children everywhere. All profits derived from the sale of this book will be donated to the trust.

"An excellent notion! I remember how it was to be a child, and I'm glad to see someone standing up for the children."

—Piers Anthony

\$19.95 ★ 0-312-93156-5 ★ 416 pages ★ JUNE

TOR hardcovers are distributed nationally by St. Martin's Press.



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

EDITOR'S NOTES

Season's Greetings from the staff of AHMM



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

Cathleen Jordan, Editor; **Holly Garrison**, Managing Editor; **Judy Downer**, Editorial Assistant; **Terri Czezczko**, Art Director; **Ron Kuliner**, Associate Art Director; **Nancy Siwinski**, Junior Designer; **Carole Dixon**, Production Director; **Cynthia Manson**, Director of Marketing and Subsidiary Rights; **Florence Eichin**, Manager, Contracts and Permissions; **Elizabeth Beatty**, Subscription Manager; **Brian McKeon**, Circulation Planning Director; **Christian Dorbandt**, Newsstand Marketing and Promotion Manager; **Dennis Jones**, Newsstand Operations Manager; **Veena Raghavan**, Public Relations Promotions Manager; **Irene Bozoki**, Classified Advertising Director; **A. Bruce Chatterton**, Advertising Director; **Lisa Feerick**, Advertising Services Manager.

(New York: 212-557-9100; Chicago: 312-346-0712; Los Angeles: 213-795-3114.)

Joel Davis, President; **Joe DeFalco**, Vice President, Finance; **Carl Barte**, Vice President, Manufacturing.



**Don't Miss Out on the Second Annual
Davis Mystery Magazines' Mystery
Cruise '90 February 10 to 17, 1990
Aboard Holland America Cruise Line's
Fabulous Luxury Liner M.S. Noordam**

There's no mystery about the best way to experience seven sun-and-fun-filled days in the Caribbean. Enjoy the wonderful ports of San Juan, Puerto Rico; Tortola, British Virgin Islands; St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands; and Nassau, the Bahamas, all while sailing aboard one of the finest cruise ships afloat.

The best way to enjoy a mystery is to be a part of one! There will be crimes to solve, trivia contests, movie classics, great prizes, gifts, parties, and surprises galore.

We are pleased to announce that our two Edgar Award winning authors will be Ed Hoch and Bill Crenshaw. You will have an opportunity to meet both of these special guests and hear them speak about the "art of writing mysteries."

Book Early. Space Is Limited.

Prices for the mystery cruise include round-trip air fare and start at only \$1279.00

per person, *double occupancy from most major cities*. There is limited availability in some accommodation categories. First come, first served.

To be part of this fabulous week and to receive all the special amenities, you must book your cruise through:

OMNI GROUP CRUISES, INC.

6513 Hollywood Boulevard, Hollywood, CA 90028

Write or call for more information (800) 876-OMNI

Please send me more information about Mystery Cruise '90

Name _____

(Please print)

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Phone () _____

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FICTION

The Christmas Bear

by Herbert Resnicow



Illustration by Patricia Olstad

“Up there, Grandma,” Debbie pointed, all excited, tugging at my skirt, “in the top row. Against the wall. See?” I’m not really her grandma, but at six and a half the idea of a great-grandmother is hard to understand. All her little friends have grandmothers, so she has a grandmother. When she’s a little older, I’ll tell her the whole story.

The firehouse was crowded this Friday night, not like the usual weekend where the volunteer firemen explain to their wives that they have to polish the old pumper and the second-hand ladder truck. They give the equipment a quick lick-and-a-promise and then sit down to an uninterrupted evening of pinochle. Not that there’s all that much to do in Pitman anyway—we’re over fifty miles from Pittsburgh, even if anyone could afford to pay city prices for what the big city offers—but still, a man’s first thought has to be of his wife and family. Lord knows I’ve seen too much of the opposite in my own generation and all the pain and trouble it caused, and mine could’ve given lessons in devotion to this new generation that seems to be interested only in fun. What they call fun.

Still, they weren’t all bad.

Even Homer Curtis, who was the worst boy of his day, always full of mischief and very disrespectful, didn’t turn out all that bad. That was after he got married, of course; not before. He was just voted fire chief and, to give him credit, this whole Rozovski affair was his idea, may God bless him.

Little Petrina Rozovski—she’s only four years old and she’s always been small for her age—her grandfather was shift foreman over my Jake in the mine while we were courting. We married young in those days because there was no future and you grabbed what happiness you could and that’s how I came to be the youngest great-grandmother in the county, only sixty-seven, though that big horsefaced Mildred Ungaric keeps telling everybody I’m over seventy. Poor Petrina has to have a liver transplant, and soon. Real soon. You wouldn’t believe what that costs, even if you could find the right liver in the first place. Seventy-five thousand dollars, and it could go to a lot more than that, depending. There isn’t that much money in the whole county.

There was talk about going to the government—as if the government’s got any way to just give money for things like this or to make somebody give her baby’s liver to a poor little

girl—or holding a raffle, or something, but none of the ideas was worth a tinker's dam. Then Homer, God bless him, had this inspiration. The volunteer firemen—they do it every year—collect toys for the poor children, which, these days, is half the town, to make sure every child gets *some* present for Christmas. And we all, even if we can't afford it, we all give something. Then one of them dresses up as Santa Claus and they all get on the ladder truck and, on Christmas Eve, they ride through the town giving out the presents. There's a box for everyone, so nobody knows who's getting a present, but the boxes for the families where the father is still working just have a candy bar in them or something like that. And for the littlest kids, they put Santa on top of the ladder and two guys turn the winch and lift him up to the roof as though he's going to go down the chimney and the kids' eyes get all round and everybody feels the way a kid should on Christmas Eve.

We had a town meeting to discuss the matter. "Raffles are no good," Homer declared, "because one person wins and everybody else loses. This year we're going to have an auction where everybody wins. Everybody who can will give a good toy—it can be used, but it's got

to be good—in addition to what they give for the poor kids. Then the firemen will auction off those extra toys and the idea of that auction is to pay as *much* as possible instead of as little." That was sort of like the Indian potlatches they used to have around here that my grandfather told me about. Well, you can imagine the opposition to that one. But Homer overrode them all. Skinny as he is, when he stands up and raises his voice—he's the tallest man in town by far—he usually gets his way. Except with his wife, and that's as it should be. "Anyway," he pointed out, "it's a painless way of getting the donations Rozovski needs to get a liver transplant for Petrina."

Shorty Porter, who never backed water for anyone, told Homer, "Your brain ain't getting enough oxygen up there. Even if every family in town bought something for ten dollars on the average, with only twelve hundred families in town, we'd be short at least sixty-three thousand dollars, not to mention what it would cost for Irma Rozovski to stay in a motel near the hospital. And not everybody in town can pay more than what the present he bids on is worth. So you better figure on getting a lot less than twelve thousand, Homer, and what good that'll do, I fail to see."

Levi Porter always had a good head for figures. One of these days we ought to make him mayor, if he could take the time off from busting his butt in his little back yard farm which, with his brood, he really can't.

"I never said," Homer replied, "that we were going to raise enough money this way to take care of the operation and everything. The beauty of my plan is . . . I figure we'll raise about four thousand. Right, Shorty?"

"That's about what I figured," Shorty admitted.

"We give the money to Hank and Irma and they take Petrina to New York. They take her to a TV station, to one of those news reporters who are always looking for ways to help people. We have a real problem here, a real emergency, and Petrina, with that sweet little face and her big brown eyes, once she appears on TV, her problems are over. If only ten percent of the people in the U.S. send in one cent each, that's all, just one cent, we'd get two hundred fifty thousand dollars. That would cover everything and leave plenty over to set up an office, right here in Pitman, for a clearing house for livers for all the poor little kids in that fix. And the publicity would remind some poor unfortunate mother that her child—children

are dying in accidents every day and nobody knows who or where, healthy children—her child's liver could help save the life of a poor little girl."

Even Shorty had to admit it made sense. "And to top it all," Homer added, "if we do get enough money to set up a liver clearing house, we've brought a job to Pitman, for which I'd like to nominate Irma Rozowski, to make up for what she's gone through. And if it works out that way, maybe even two jobs, so Hank can have some work too." Well, that was the clincher. We all agreed and that's how it came about that I was standing in front of the display of the auction presents in the firehouse on the Friday night before Christmas week while Deborah was tugging and pointing at that funny-looking teddy bear, all excited, like I'd never seen her before.

Deborah's a sad little girl. Not that she doesn't have reason, what with her father running off just before the wedding and leaving Caroline in trouble; I never did like that Wesley Sladen in the first place. The Social Security doesn't give enough to support three on, and nobody around here's about to marry a girl going on twenty-nine with another mouth to feed, and I'm too old to earn much money, so Carrie's work-

ing as a waitress at the Highway Rest. But thanks to my Jake, we have a roof over our heads and we always will. My father was against my marrying him. I was born a Horvath, and my father wanted me to marry a nice Hungarian boy, not a damn foreigner, but I was of age and my mother was on my side and Jake and I got married in St. Anselm's and I wore a white gown, and I had a right to, not like it is today.

That was in '41 and before the year was out we were in the war. Jake volunteered and, not knowing I was pregnant, I didn't stop him. He was a good man, made sergeant, always sent every penny home. With me working in the factory, I even put a little away. After Marian was born, the foreman was nice enough to give me work to do at home on my sewing machine, so it was all right. Jake had taken out the full G.I. insurance and, when it happened, we got ten thousand dollars, which was a lot of money in those days. I bought the house, which cost almost two thousand dollars, and put the rest away for the bad times.

My daughter grew up to be a beautiful girl and she married a nice boy, John Brodzowski, but when Caroline was born, complications set in and Marian never made it out of the

hospital. I took care of John and the baby for six months until John, who had been drinking, hit a tree going seventy. The police said it was an accident. I knew better but I kept my mouth shut because we needed the insurance.

So here we were, quiet little Deborah pulling at me and pointing at that teddy bear, all excited, and smiling for the first time I can remember. "That's what I want, Grandma," she begged. "He's my bear."

"You have a teddy bear," I told her. "We can't afford another one. I just brought you to the firehouse to look at all the nice things."

"He's not a teddy bear, Grandma, and I love him."

"But he's so funny looking," I objected. And he was, too. Black, sort of, but shining blueish when the light hit the right way, with very long hair. Ears bigger than a teddy bear's, and a longer snout. Not cute at all. Some white hairs at the chin and a big crescent-shaped white patch on his chest. And the eyes, not round little buttons, but slanted oval pieces of purple glass. I couldn't imagine what she saw in him. There was a tag, with #273 on it, around his neck. "Besides," I said, "I've only got eighteen dollars for all the presents, for everything. I'm sure they'll want at least

ten dollars for him on account of it's for charity."

She began crying, quietly, not making a fuss; Deborah never did. Even at her age she understood, children do understand, that there were certain things that were not for us, but I could see her heart was broken and I didn't know what to do.

Just then the opening ceremonies started. Young Father Casimir, of St. Anselm's, gave the opening benediction, closing with "It is more blessed to give than to receive." I don't know how well that set with Irma Rozovski and the other poor people there, but he'll learn better when he gets older. Then Homer brought up Irma, with Petrina in her arms looking weaker and yellower than ever, to speak. "I just want to thank you all, all my friends and neighbors, for being so kind and . . ." Then she broke down and couldn't talk at all. Petrina didn't cry, she never cried, just looked sad and hung onto her mother. Then Homer came and led Irma away and said a few words I didn't even listen to. I knew what I had to do and I'd do it. Christmas is for the children, to make the children happy, that's the most important part. The children. I'd just explain to Carrie, when she got home, that I didn't get her any-

thing this year and I didn't want her to get me anything. She'd understand.

I got hold of Homer in a corner and told him, "Look, Homer, for some reason Deborah's set on that teddy bear in the top row. Now all I've got is eighteen dollars, and I don't think you'd get anywhere near that much for it at the auction, but I don't want to take a chance on losing it and break Deborah's heart. I'm willing to give it all to you right now, if you'll sell it to me."

"Gee, I'd like to, Miz Sophie," he said, "but I can't. I have to go according to the rules. And if I did that for you, I'd have to do it for everybody; then with everybody picking their favorites, nobody would bid on anything and we couldn't raise the money for Petrina to go to New York."

"Come on, Homer, this ain't the first time you've broken some rules. Besides, I wouldn't tell anyone; I'd just take it off the shelf after everybody's left and no one would know the difference. It's an ugly looking teddy bear anyway."

"I'm real sorry, Mrs. Slowinski," he said, going all formal on me, "but I can't. Besides, there's no way to get it now. Those shelves, they're just boxes piled up with boards across them. You look at them crooked, and the whole thing'll fall down.

There's no way to get to the top row until you've taken off the other rows. That's why the numbers start at the bottom."

"You're a damned fool, Homer, and I'm going to get that bear for Deborah anyway. I'm going to get him for a lot less than eighteen dollars too, so your stubbornness has cost the fund a lot of money and you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

We didn't go back to the firehouse until two days before Christmas Eve, Monday, when Carrie was off. Deborah had insisted on showing the bear to her mother to make sure we knew exactly which bear it was she wanted, but when we got there the bear was gone. Poor Deborah started crying, real loud this time, and even Carrie couldn't quiet her down. I picked her up and told her, swore to her, that I would get that bear back for her, but she just kept on sobbing.

I went right up to Homer to tell him off for selling the bear to somebody else instead of to me but before I could open my mouth, he said, "That wasn't right, Mrs. Slowinski, but as long as it's done, I won't make a fuss. Just give me the eighteen dollars and we'll forget about it."

That was like accusing me of stealing, and Milly Ungaric was

standing near and she had that nasty smile on her face, so I knew who had stolen the bear. I ignored what Homer said and asked, "Who was on duty last night?" We don't have a fancy alarm system in Pitman; one of the firemen sleeps in the firehouse near the phone.

"Shorty Porter," Homer said, and I went right off.

I got hold of him on the side. "Levi, did you see anyone come in last night?" I asked. "I mean late."

"Only Miz Mildred," he said. "Just before I went to sleep."

Well, I knew it was her, but that wasn't what I meant. "I mean after you went to sleep. Did any noise wake you up?"

"When I sleep, Miz Sophie, only the phone bell wakes me up."

She must have come back later, the doors are never locked, and taken the bear. She's big enough, but how could she reach it? She couldn't climb over the shelves, everything would be knocked over. And she couldn't reach it from the floor. So how did she do it? Maybe it wasn't her, though I would have liked it to be. I went back to Homer. He was tall enough and had arms like a chimpanzee. "Homer," I said, "I'm going to forget what you said if you'll just do one thing. Stand in front of the toys and reach for the top shelf."

He got red, but he didn't blow. After a minute he said, sort of strangled, "I already thought of that. If I can't reach it by four feet, nobody can. Tell you what; give me seventeen dollars and explain how you did it, and I'll pay the other dollar out of my own pocket."

"You always were a stupid, nasty boy, Homer, and you always will be. Well, if you won't help me, I'll have to find out by myself; start at the beginning and trace who'd want to steal a funny-looking bear like that. Who donated the bear?"

"People just put toys in the boxes near the door. We pick out the ones for the auction and the ones for the Santa Claus boxes. No way of knowing who gave what."

I knew he wouldn't be any help, so I got Carrie and Debbie and went to the one man in town who might help me trace the bear, Mr. Wong. He doesn't have just a grocery, a *credit* grocery, thank God; he carries things you wouldn't even find in Pittsburgh. His kids were all grown, all famous scientists and doctors and professors, but he still stayed here, even after Mrs. Wong died. Mrs. Wong never spoke a word of English, but she understood everything. Used to be, her kids all came here for Chinese New Year—that's about a month after

ours—and they'd have a big feast and bring the grandchildren. Funny how Mrs. Wong was able to raise six kids in real hard times, but none of her children has more than two. Now, on Chinese New Year, Mr. Wong closes the store for a week and goes to one of his kids. But he always comes back here.

"Look I have for you," he said, and gave Debbie a little snake on a stick, the kind where you turn it and the snake moves like it's real. She was still sniffing, but she smiled a little. The store was chock full of all kinds of Chinese things; little dragons and fat Buddhas with bobbing heads and candied ginger. I knew I was in the right place.

"Did you ever sell anyone a teddy bear?" I asked. "Not a regular teddy bear, but a black one with big purple eyes."

"No sell," he said. "Give."

"Okay." I had struck gold on the first try. "Who'd you give it to?"

"Nobody. Put in box in fire-house."

"You mean for the auction?"

"Petrina nice girl. Like Debbie. Very sick. Must help."

"But . . ." Dead end. I'd have to find another way to trace the bear so I could find out who'd want to steal it. "All right, where'd you get the teddy bear?"

"Grandmother give me. Be-

fore I go U.S. Make good luck. Not teddy bear. Blue bear. From Kansu."

"You mean there's a bear that looks like this?"

"Oh yes. Chinese bear. Moon bear. Very danger. Strong. In Kansu."

"Your grandmother *made* it? For you?"

"Not *make*, make. Grandfather big hunter, kill bear. Moon bear very big good luck. Eat bear, get strong, very good. Have good luck in U.S."

"That bear is real bearskin?"

"Oh yes. Grandmother cut little piece for here," he put his hand under his chin, "and for here," he put his hand on his chest. "Make moon." He moved his hand in the crescent shape the bear had on its chest. "Why call moon bear."

"You had that since you were a little boy?" I was touched. "And you gave it for Petrina? Instead of your own grandchildren?"

"Own grandchildren want sportcar, computer, skateboard, not old Chinese bear."

Well, that was typical of all modern kids, not just Chinese, but it didn't get me any closer to finding out who had stolen the teddy bear, the moon bear. Deborah, though, was listening with wide eyes, no longer crying. But what was worse, that romantic story would make it all

the harder on her if I didn't get that bear back. She went up to the counter and asked, "Did it come in?"

"Oh yes." He reached down and put a wooden lazy tongs on top of the counter.

"I got it for you, Grandma," Debbie said, "for your arthritis, so you don't have to bend down. I was going to save it for under the tree, but you looked so sad . . ."

God bless you, Deborah, I said in my heart, that's the answer. I put my fingers in the scissor grip and extended the tongs. They were only about three feet long, not long enough, and they were already beginning to bend under their own weight. No way anyone, not even Mildred Ungaric, could use them to steal the moon bear. Then I knew. For sure. I turned around and there it was, hanging on the top shelf. I turned back to Mr. Wong and said, casually, "What do you call that thing grocers use to get cans from the top shelf? The long stickhandle with the grippers at the end?"

"Don't know. In Chinese I say, 'Get can high shelf.'"

"Doesn't matter. Why did you steal the bear back? Decided to sell it to a museum or something?"

"No. Why I steal? If I want sell, I no give." He was puzzled,

not insulted. "Somebody steal moon bear?"

He was right. But so was I. At least I knew *how* it was stolen. You didn't need a "get can high shelf." All the thief needed was a long thing with a hook on the end. Or a noose. Like a broomstick. Or a fishing rod. Anything that would reach from where you were standing to the top of the back row so you could get the bear without knocking over the shelves or the other toys. It had to be Mildred Ungaric; she might be mean, but she wasn't stupid. Any woman had enough long sticks in her kitchen, and enough string and hooks to make a bear-stealer, though she'd look awful funny walking down the street carrying one of those. But it didn't have to be that way. There was something in the firehouse that anyone could use, one of those long poles with the hooks on the end they break your windows with when you have a fire. All you'd have to do is get that hook under the string that held the number tag around the moon bear's neck and do it quietly enough not to wake Levi Porter. Which meant that anyone in town could have stolen the moon bear.

But who would? It would be like stealing from poor little Petrina herself. Mildred was mean, but even she wouldn't do

that. Homer was nasty; maybe he accused me to cover up for himself. Mr. Wong might have changed his mind, in spite of what he said; you don't give away a sixty-year-old childhood memory like that without regrets. Levi Porter was in the best position to do it; there was only his word that he slept all through the night and he has eight kids he can hardly feed. Heck, anyone in town could have done it. All I knew was that I didn't.

So who stole the moon bear?

That night I made a special supper for Carrie, and Deborah served. There's nothing a waitress enjoys so much on her time off as being served. I know; there was a time I waitressed myself. After supper, Carrie put Deborah to bed and read to her, watched TV for a while, then got ready to turn in herself. There's really nothing for a young woman to do in Pitman unless she's the kind that runs around with the truckers that stop by, and Carrie wasn't that type. She had made one mistake, trusted one boy, but that could have happened to anybody. And she did what was right and was raising Deborah to be a pride to us all.

I stayed up and sat in my rocker, trying to think of who would steal that bear, but there was no way to find that out. At

least it wasn't a kid, a little kid, who had done it; those firemen's poles are heavy. Of course it could have been a teenager, but what would a teenager want with a funny-looking little bear like that? There were plenty of better toys in the lower rows to tempt a teenager, toys that anyone could take in a second with no trouble at all. But none of them had been stolen. No, it wasn't a teenager; I was pretty sure of that.

Finally, I went to sleep. Or to bed, at least. I must have been awake for half the night and didn't come up with anything. But I did know one thing I had to do.

That night being the last night before Christmas Eve, they were going to hold the auction for Petrina in the firehouse. I didn't want to get there too early; no point in making Deborah feel bad seeing all the other presents bought up and knowing she wasn't going to get her moon bear. But I did want her to know it wasn't just idle talk when I promised I'd get her bear back.

Debbie and I waited until the last toy was auctioned off and Porter announced the total. Four thousand, three hundred seventy-two dollars and fifty cents. More than we had expected and more than enough to send the Rozovskis to New York. Then

I stood up and said, "I bid eighteen dollars, cash, for the little black bear, Number 273."

Homer looked embarrassed. "Please, Mrs. Slowinski, you know we don't have that bear any more."

"I just want to make sure, Mr. Curtis, that when I find that bear, it's mine. Mine and Deborah's. So you can just add eighteen dollars to your total, Mr. Porter, and when that bear turns up, it's mine." Now if anyone was seen with the bear, everybody'd know whose it was. And what's more, if the thief had a guilty conscience, he'd know where to return the bear.

That night I stayed in my rocking chair again, rocking and thinking; thinking and rocking. I was sure I was on the right track. Why would anyone want to take the moon bear? That had to be the way to find the thief; to figure out why anyone would take the bear. But as much as I rocked, much as I thought, I was stuck right there. Finally, after midnight, I gave up. There was no way to figure it out. Maybe if I slept on it . . . Only trouble was, tomorrow was Christmas Eve, and even if I figured out who took the bear, there was no way I could get it back in time to put it under the tree so Debbie would find it when she woke up Christmas morning. For all I

knew, the bear was in Pittsburgh by now, or even back in China. Maybe I shouldn't have warned the thief by making such a fuss when I bought the missing bear.

Going to bed didn't help. I lay awake, thinking of everything that had happened, from the time we first stood behind the firetrucks and saw the bear, to the time in Mr. Wong's store when I figured out how the bear had been stolen. Then all of a sudden it was clear. I knew who had stolen the bear. That is I knew *how* it had been stolen and that told me *who* had stolen it which told me *how*, which . . . What really happened was I knew it all, all at once. Of course, I didn't know *where* the bear was, not exactly, but I'd get to that eventually. One thing I had to remember was not to tell Deborah what I had figured out. Not that I was wrong—I *wasn't* wrong; everything fit too perfectly—but I might not be able to get the bear back. After all, how hard would it be to destroy the bear, to burn it or throw it in the dump, rather than go to jail?

The next morning Deborah woke me. "It's all right, Grandma," she said. "I didn't really want that old moon bear. I really wanted a wetting doll. Or a plain doll. So don't cry." I wasn't aware I was crying, but

I guess I was. Whatever else I had done in my life, whatever else Carrie had done, to bring to life, to bring up such a sweet wonderful human being, a girl like this, one to be so proud of, that made up for everything. I only wished Jake could have been here with me to see her. And Wesley Sladen, the fool, to see what he'd missed.

I didn't say anything during breakfast—we always let Carrie sleep late because of her hours—but right after we washed up, I dressed Deborah warmly. "We're going for a long walk," I told her. She took my hand and we started out.

I went to the garage where he worked and motioned Levi Porter to come out. He came, wiping his hands on a rag. Without hesitating, I told him what I had to tell him. "You stole the teddy bear. You swiveled the ladder on the ladder truck around, pointing in the right direction, and turned the winch until the ladder extended over the bear. Then you crawled out on the flat ladder and stole the bear. After you put everything back where it was before, you went to sleep."

Well, he didn't bat an eye, just nodded his head. "Yep, that's the way it was," he said, not even saying he was sorry. "I figured you knew something when you bought the missing

bear. Nobody throws away eighteen dollars for nothing." Deborah just stared up at him, not understanding how a human being could do such a thing to her. She took my hand for comfort, keeping me between her and Shorty Porter.

"Well, that's *my* bear," I said. "I bought it for Deborah; she had her heart set on it." He wasn't a bit moved. "She loved that bear, Porter. You broke her heart."

"I'm sorry about that, Miz Sophie," he said, "I really didn't want to hurt anybody. I didn't know about Debbie when I stole the bear."

"Well, the least you could do is give it back. If you do, I might consider, just *consider*, not setting the law on you." I didn't really want to put a man with eight children in jail and, up till now, he'd been a pretty good citizen, but I wasn't about to show him that. "So you just go get it, Mr. Porter. Right now, and hop to it."

"Okay, Miz Sophie, but it ain't here. We'll have to drive over." He stuck his head in the shop and told Ed Mahaffey that he had to go someplace, be back soon, and we got in his pickup truck.

I wasn't paying attention to where we were going and when he stopped, my heart stopped too. Petrina was lying on the

couch in the living room, clutching the moon bear to her skinny little chest. Irma was just standing there, wondering what had brought us. "It's about the teddy bear," Levi Porter apologized. "It belongs to Debbie. I have to take it back."

We went over to the couch. "You see," he explained to me, "on opening night, Petrina fell in love with the bear. I wanted to get it for her, but I didn't have any money left. So I took it, figuring it wasn't really stealing; everything there was for Petrina anyway. If I'd known about Debbie, I would've worked out something else, maybe."

He leaned over the couch and gently, very gently, took the moon bear out of Petrina's hands. "I'm sorry, honey," he told the thin little girl, "it's really Debbie's. I'll get you a different bear soon." The sad little girl let the bear slip slowly out of her hands, not resisting, but not really letting go either. She said nothing, so used to hurt, so used to disappointment, so used to having everything slip away from her, but her soft dark eyes filled with tears as Shorty took the bear. I could have sworn that the moon bear's purple glass eyes looked full of pain, too.

Shorty put the bear gently into Debbie's arms and she cra-

dled the bear closely to her. She put her face next to the bear's and kissed him and whispered something to him that I didn't catch, my hearing not being what it used to be. Then she went over to the couch and put the bear back into Petrina's hands. "He likes you better," she said. "He wants to stay with you. He loves you."

We stood there for a moment, all of us, silent. Petrina clutched the bear to her, tightly, lovingly, and almost smiled. Irma started crying and I might've too, a little. Shorty picked Deborah up and kissed her like she was his own. "You're blessed," he said to me. "From Heaven."

He drove us home, and on the way back I asked Debbie what she said to the bear. "I was just telling him his name," she said innocently, "and he said it was exactly right."

"What is his name?" I asked.

"Oh, that was *my* name for him, Grandma. Petrina told him *her* name; he has a different name now," and that's all she would say about it.

I invited Shorty in but he couldn't stay; had to get back to the garage. If he took too long

—well, there were plenty of good mechanics out of work. He promised he'd get Deborah another gift for Christmas, but he couldn't do it in time for tonight. I told him not to worry; I'd work out something.

When we got home, I got started making cookies with chocolate sprinkles, the kind Deborah likes. She helped me. After a while, when the first batch of cookies was baking, her cheeks powdered with flour and her pretty face turned away, she said, quietly, "It's all right not to get a present for Christmas. As long as you know somebody *wanted* to give it to you and spent all her money to get it."

My heart was so full I couldn't say anything for a while. Then I lifted her onto my lap and hugged her to my heart. "Oh, Debbie my love, you'll understand when you're older, but you've just gotten the best Christmas present of all: the chance to make a little child happy."

I held her away and looked into her wise, innocent eyes and wondered if, maybe, she already understood that.

Important Notice to Subscribers: All subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. 7055, Red Oak, Iowa 51591. For change of address, please advise 6 to 8 weeks before moving. Send us your current mailing label with new address.

FICTION

Twist of Fate

by Arthur Lyons



Illustration by Joe Jereda

20

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It was hard for me to think of the man across the table as the Most Evil Man in the World, even though there were thousands—perhaps millions—who would eagerly attest to the fact.

His sheer physical size was menacing enough—six foot five and two hundred eighty-four pounds of solid muscle—and his ensemble of dead animal skins fit the image—a leopardskin vest over a black silk shirt, black leather pants, and black and white spotted boots that looked as if they could have been made out of a couple of Dalmatians.

It was the face that threw me off. It was round and pudgy-cheeked, with pale, clear skin and a soft, full-lipped, babyish mouth. His eyes were dark brown and twinkled with boyish innocence, and a Dennis-the-Menace cowlick stood up prominently on the back of his head of thinning blond hair.

But I was a detective, trained to see through appearances. I was too smart to be fooled by the guilelessness of that face. Butcher Baker was the Master of Mayhem, the Champion of the Cheap Shot, the Doctor of Dirty Tricks. Only one hour before, I'd seen the *real* Butcher in action as he had accepted a cake—a pre-match gift from a ten-year-old chiffon-dressed

Shirley Temple lookalike—to sneeringly smash it on the ground in front of the horrified little girl.

The crowd's subsequent outpouring of rage at the dastardly act only seemed to incite in the Butcher an even more wanton lust for destruction, and he proceeded to batter and bloody his opponent of the evening with particular relish, finally rendering the poor man unconscious by garrotting him with a strand of rope he had smuggled into the ring in his trunks.

That was the Butcher Baker the wrestling public knew and hated, and I was not about to be fooled by this impostor's mild, soft-spoken manner when he said, "Joe Exizian says you're good. He says you're honest and dependable."

Joe Exizian and I went back to my *Chronicle* days, when he had been churning out a sports column and I had been working the crime beat. Joe was still churning out his sports column and I was still working the crime beat, but not for the newspaper. I had not talked to him for quite a while, and was rather surprised when he had called up a couple of days ago to tell me that he had recommended me to a "wrestler friend" who was in need of a good private detective to handle a "personal problem." He didn't know

what the problem was, but warned me not to be put off by the Butcher's rep, that he was really as "gentle as a lamb." But then, Joe was a sports writer and meaningless clichés were his stock in trade. Some lamb. The guy wore skinned firehouse dogs on his feet, for chrissakes.

"Joe and I go way back."

"That's what he said. You used to work at the paper or something."

"That's right."

He nodded. "Joe's a great guy. His father used to be on the circuit, you know."

I said I knew.

"Count Cagliostro. Used to hypnotize his opponents and make 'em jump out of the ring."

He chuckled, then lapsed into an uncomfortable silence. He seemed to be having more trouble wrestling with the words in his head than with his opponent in the ring tonight. I took a sip of my drink and waited. It didn't take long. "I think my wife is cheating on me."

I nodded without saying anything.

His eyes dropped to the table, as if he were embarrassed. "I've had the feeling something was wrong for the past three months. Shel started acting strange, withdrawn. She insisted it was nothing, that everything was fine, so I put it out of my mind.

Then, two weeks ago, I was working the eastern wheel—"

He glanced up and caught my quizzical expression. "That's what we call the circuit back east—New York, New Jersey, Philly." His huge hand toyed with the beer mug in front of him. "When I'm on the road, I call Shel every night after my match. Only, in Newark, I came down with stomach flu real bad and had to cancel, so I called early. She wasn't home. I kept calling. She finally answered at eleven, about the time I usually call. I asked her what she'd been doing, and she said she'd just been sitting home, watching TV. When I told her I'd been trying to reach her, she got real uptight. Said she'd probably been in the shower or something."

"Maybe she was."

"For three hours?"

"Maybe the phone was out of order."

He stared at me and shook his cowlicked head. "Something is going on. I know it." He reached into his pocket and brought out a piece of paper. "This was left in my dressing room two nights ago."

It was a typed note on ordinary bond paper. *Your wife is stepping out on you. Better wake up.* It was signed *A Concerned Friend.*

"Any idea who sent it?"

"No."

"Mind if I keep this?"

"No. I don't want the damn thing."

I pocketed the note and looked around, trying to gather my thoughts. The place was a typical sports bar, with framed photographs of various sports personalities and items of jock paraphernalia—hockey sticks, football jerseys, etc.—hanging on the walls. Above the bar at the far end of the room, a color TV was tuned in to an ESPN broadcast of funny car races. As I glanced at it, I noticed a disheveled, middle-aged man turned around on his stool in the middle of the bar, staring at us. I skirted his gaze and looked back at Butcher. "How long have you been married?"

"Seven years," he said, taking a swig of beer. "We met in Alabama. Fayetteville. I was wrestling there and she was a ticket taker. That was before I made the bigtime, when I was still a babyface."

"Babyface?"

"A good guy," he explained. "I was plain old Darryl Lindstrom then." He paused thoughtfully. "Actually, it was Shel who got things really rolling for me. It was her idea that I should become a heel. She thought it was a natural. I always had a gift for gab, and with my face, I could look real

innocent and convince the refs I wasn't cheating. The crowds ate it up. Local promoters started to notice how I could get the heat up, and I started getting more matches. Then, one of Steve Laidlaw's scouts came to see me in Dallas and offered me a contract to wrestle in the IWF—"

"IWF?"

"Interstate Wrestling Federation."

I nodded.

"As a babyface, I was getting seventy-five dollars a match and spending my own money for gas. Now I'm getting five thousand, plus travel expenses."

Five thousand bucks to choke out some buffoon with a rope—it made one pause to reflect upon the state of the world. As I did that, I noticed that the watcher at the bar had slid off his stool and was weaving unsteadily toward us. Butcher caught my glance and turned around. Sober, the gray-faced, consumptive-looking man didn't look as if he would have been a match for Don Knotts, never mind the Butcher, but the wrestler tensed visibly as he watched the drunk approach.

A foot from the table, the man stopped and peered bleary-eyed at the man-mountain in front of him. "You're Butcher Baker."

"What of it?" Butcher snarled menacingly.

The drunk's face broke into a wide grin and he thrust out a cocktail napkin. "How about an autograph?"

Butcher's shoulders relaxed, but he continued to scowl as he took out a pen and scribbled his name on the napkin.

"Thanks," the man said, trying to focus on the prize. "I think you're the best. You should be the champ, not that wimp Hogan."

Butcher grunted and watched the drunk stagger away, but didn't relax until the man was securely back on his stool. "I get real nervous when a fan gets too close."

"Why is that?"

"You never know what they're going to do. I'm not afraid of any wrestler, but fans scare me spitless. I've been stabbed with a switchblade, sliced open with a can opener, and had ten stitches in my scalp from a metal folding chair. Once, a seventy-five-year-old lady stabbed me in the back with a hat pin. The sonofabitch went in two inches."

"I guess that's one of the drawbacks of being the Most Evil Man in the World," I quipped.

He nodded and said sarcastically: "There's an old joke among wrestlers: What has

twelve teeth and an IQ of fifty? The first ten rows of any wrestling audience."

His intelligence did not jibe with the picture I had in my mind of the typical, bellowing semiliterate challenges on Saturday morning TV. "How did you get started wrestling in the first place?"

He shrugged. "I was a defensive lineman at Oklahoma State, but I liked wine, women, and fights too much. I wound up dropping out of school, and a local promoter approached me and offered to teach me to wrestle. I didn't intend it to be a permanent thing, but at the time, it sounded like fun." He grinned shyly. "I've always been a bit of a ham."

He might have been rotten at the core, but on the surface at least, the man had an ingenuous sort of charm it was hard not to like. "Getting back to your wife: Have you asked her about it directly?"

"She denies anything is wrong, she says it's all in my head."

"You're sure it's not?"

He frowned. "I know her too well. She's changed. It's a bunch of little things. Her voice, the way she touches me. Something is going on, I *know* it."

I sighed and finished my vodka. As a rule, I tried to avoid domestic surveillance cases.

Sneaking around for prolonged periods of time can be not only boring and physically exhausting, it can get downright ugly, no matter which way it comes out. Betrayal always brings out the worst in people, and in spite of the fact that he seemed like a big teddy bear now, I was not anxious to discover the worst in Butcher Baker. I might not have, either, if business had not been so slow the past month.

"Say I find out you're right," I said, watching him carefully. "What would you do about it?"

He caught my drift immediately. "Look, Mr. Asch, I love my wife. I'd never hurt her, if that's what you're thinking. I want to hold on to her, to our marriage, but if she's in love with somebody else, I have a right to know. I'm entitled to that, at least."

He sounded earnestly pained, and I found myself believing him. What the hell, maybe he was all teddy bear. "Okay."

He pulled a wallet from his back pocket, counted out ten one hundred dollar bills from a wad twice that size, and handed them to me. "That enough to get you started?"

"Plenty," I said, tucking away the bills safely in my own wallet. "You usually carry that much around on you?"

He blinked slowly. "Yeah, why?"

I shrugged. Why not? Who would be stupid enough to try to take it away from him? I wrote him out a receipt, and he gave me his address in Pacific Palisades. "I'm leaving town tomorrow for three days. I have bouts in Frisco, Portland, and Seattle."

I took down the make, color, and license number of the car his wife drove and asked if he had a picture. He pulled out a color snapshot from his wallet and stared at it as if reluctant to part with it, before handing it over.

In the photograph, Butcher was cheek-to-cheek with a pretty, sultry-eyed brunette, with a beehive hairdo which had been out of style for fifteen years, at least in this part of the country.

"That was taken before we were married," he said.

That explained why they looked so happy. "I'll make sure you get it back," I assured him as I slipped it into my jacket pocket. I took down the time and number of his flight tomorrow and asked if his wife would be driving him to the airport. He said she would be.

Before leaving, I had to ask one last question, for my own peace of mind. "Are those boots real Dalmatian?"

"Dalmatian puppy skin," he said proudly. "It's softer than

the adult dog skin. There's a ranch down in Mexico that breeds 'em. You want a pair? I can get 'em for you cheap."

My reservations about taking on the man as a client were suddenly manually overriding any thoughts of money. Butcher seemed to sense my discomfort. His face broke into a wide, boyish grin and he said, "I was just kidding. They're imitation. So is the jacket." He winked. "But don't let any of my fans know."

I promised I wouldn't and went out feeling a little better about things. If the man had a garrotting rope hidden in the waistband of his leather pants, I'd seen no indication of it.

He stood up and clapped me on the back, loosening a couple of my teeth. "Joe's right about you. You're okay."

I just hoped Joe was right about him.

At five twenty-two the next afternoon, I was sitting in a rented Hyundai across the street from the Bakers' large one story ranchstyle house, hoping my gut feeling was right, when the garage door opened and a candy-apple-red Corvette backed out.

Shelley Baker was driving, the rest of the car interior was filled up by Butcher's massive head and shoulders. As the car

passed, I saw that the woman had forsaken her out-of-date beehive for a leonine Farrah Fawcett shag. Some people never catch up, no matter how hard they try.

I tailed the Corvette to LAX and watched from a distance as Butcher hefted his bags out of the trunk, kissed his wife goodbye, and disappeared inside the terminal. On the trip to the airport, she had been slowed by rush hour traffic, but on the return, she had an opportunity for some open field running, and used it. The Hyundai strained to keep up with her as she weaved through traffic at a steady seventy-five, but I managed to keep her in sight.

When she swung off onto the Santa Monica freeway and headed toward the beach, I knew she wasn't going home. She got off at the Lincoln exit and drove up to Wilshire, where she made a left. I speeded up when she signaled right on Pacific and nearly sideswiped her as she backed into the parking space just around the corner. Fortunately, she was too busy parallel parking to notice me as I went by and slid into a space half a block up.

She walked about like she drove, with long, hip-swiveling strides, and I had to push myself to stay even with her. If her hairstyle was out of date, her

figure wasn't. She was tall and shapely with narrow hips and elegantly curved calves, which were showcased by her black leather mini and black spiked heels. It made the tail job an easy one to take.

I followed her past the crowded patios of several *nouvelle cuisine* restaurants to the glass doors of a new, white, highrise apartment building and hung around while she spoke to someone on the speaker box. She was buzzed in and I had to race to get to the door before it closed. Fortunately, she was stepping into the elevator and didn't notice.

I didn't like the idea of letting her get a good look at me, but there wasn't much I could do about it. I managed to get my hand in the elevator doors as they slid shut and they opened again. She kept her eyes straight ahead and didn't return my smile as I stepped inside.

The button for ten was lit. I pushed eleven and edged behind her. There was no sense letting her get a better look at my face than she already had.

The pungent smell of her perfume permeated the tiny cubicle, and I breathed through my mouth to try to keep from being overwhelmed. Her perfume was not the only thing about her that was overdone. Her makeup was so thick it looked like

greasepaint. You could take the girl out of the ticket booth, but you couldn't take the ticket booth out of the girl.

She got off at ten, and it seemed to take the elevator twenty minutes to climb one floor. I slithered through the opening doors sideways, into a long hallway. I sprinted to the stairwell at the end of the corridor, took the stairs two at a time, and cracked the door to the tenth floor.

She was just stepping through a door halfway down the hall on the right and I waited for it to close before going to it. I took down the apartment number and went downstairs to check the mailboxes.

The name on 1002 was Laidlaw. It could have been a different Laidlaw from Steve Laidlaw, president of the Interstate Wrestling Foundation, but I doubted it. She could have come here to talk about her husband's career, but I doubted that, too.

I went to the car and opened the attaché case in the front seat. I exchanged my sports coat for a dark blue windbreaker and Indiana Jones hat, horn-rimmed glasses, and a dark mustache from the makeup kit, and walked across the street to the narrow strip of park that ran along the top of the cliff above the sea.

I picked a bench that afforded a good view of the front of the apartment building and settled down to wait. A steady stream of joggers cruised by, seeking that elusive "runner's high," the myth of which had been born in Never Never Land. On the old Santa Monica pier, lovers strolled hand in hand, gazed wistfully into the sunset, and smelled the odor of mustard and corn dogs wafting from the fast food stalls. I sat alone, reveling in my clever mastery of disguise and shivering from the dampness of the oncoming night.

At seven forty-five, I walked back to my car and broke out the tuna sandwich and thermos of coffee I'd packed and carted it back to my observation post.

At eight twenty-two, I ran out of coffee.

At nine forty-one, she came out of the front of the building and walked to her car. Muttering a silent thanks to St. Tedius, the patron saint of those who wait, I followed her to her house, where she put the car away in the garage, and hung around for an hour, just to make sure she didn't go out again. Then I drove home.

He came through the concourse doorway like Gulliver among the Lilliputians, wearing a fringed buckskin jacket, jeans,

hand-tooled cowboy boots, and a black cowboy hat with a feather in the front. "So what's the news?" he asked urgently, dispensing with polite formalities.

"Let's go in here," I suggested and led him into the cocktail lounge, where a smattering of passengers were waiting for red-eyes. We ordered drinks and he said impatiently, "So give."

I gave. How his wife had spent two of the past three nights at Laidlaw's by the Sea. His brow darkened, his scowl deepened, and emotions danced uncertainly on his face. Sadness claimed the last dance. He looked at me through watery eyes and asked, "You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

His mouth turned suddenly mean and he said softly, and not to me: "That bastard. I'll twist his head off like a screw-top on a bottle of cheap wine."

I had not heard that tone in his voice before, almost like a low growl. I laid a hand gently on his arm. "I don't think that would be such a good idea."

He stared at me as if he did not recognize me, his eyes full of menace. All the fears I'd entertained about the case flashed through my brain, along with an added one, that I was going to be the proverbial messenger killed for bringing the bad news.

The man was trembling with rage, and I had no hope of controlling him if he blew. That was what I got for taking on a client whose neck was bigger than his head. I said gently, "Come on, I'll drive you home."

I experienced a wave of relief when the rage in his face dampened and he nodded and stood up.

He remained silent on the way home. Two blocks from his house, I asked, "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know." There was no anger in his voice any more, just a quiet sadness.

"Don't do anything stupid. People have been known to wipe out their entire lives in one moment of passion."

He looked at me and smiled strangely. "Thanks for the advice."

I pulled up outside his house and he said, "Send me a bill."

"You've already covered it," I assured him.

He nodded and got out of the car and his huge shoulders slumped as he headed up the walk. He could hoist and body slam three hundred pound wrestlers, but the weight of this seemed too great for his back to carry.

The next time I heard from him was one fifteen the next morning. I was drifting off

watching Letterman when the phone rang. "Mr. Asch? This is Butcher. I have to talk to you."

There was enough trouble in his voice to make me forget sleep. I sat up. "What's up?"

"I don't want to talk about it on the phone. Can we meet somewhere? Somewhere private."

"Now?"

"Yeah. This can't wait."

My thoughts grew more uneasy. "Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"Could be. Look, you gotta help me. I don't know where else to go—"

I told him to take it easy and gave him directions to my place. Twenty minutes later, he knocked on the door and came in wringing his hands, with a distraught look on his face. He thanked me for seeing him and immediately began to pace the living room like a caged animal. I offered him a drink, thinking it might calm him enough to start him talking about it. It worked, and by the time he finished, I was sorry it had.

The way he told it, after I'd dropped him off in front of his house he'd gone inside and had it out with his wife. He accused her of infidelity with Laidlaw, expecting her to break down and weep contritely, beg his forgiveness, deny the charge,

something. Instead, she had just sneered at him. She admitted that she had been having an affair with Laidlaw for a year, but she was not apologetic in the least. She said that she loved the man, that he was twice the man that Butcher was in every way, which she began categorically to list. Butcher told her she might find the promoter's prowess less laudable after Butcher got through snapping his neck like a pencil, and drove over to Laidlaw's apartment to confront the man.

Butcher waited around outside the building until one of the tenants, an old man, came out to walk his Pomeranian, then slipped inside. He rang Laidlaw's buzzer and, when nobody answered, tried the handle. It was unlocked and he went in. The TV set was on in the living room and Laidlaw was on the couch in front of it, but he wasn't watching the program. His eyes were open and glazed and his neck was twisted in a way it could not have been without being broken.

There were signs of a struggle in the room—the coffee table had been kicked over, a lamp had been smashed on the floor. Stupidly, Butcher panicked and bolted from the apartment. After driving around for several hours trying to think things out, he called his wife.

To his surprise, she already knew about Laidlaw. In an emotion-charged tirade, she accused Butcher of the murder and said that the police were at the house now, waiting for him to return. She urged him to give himself up. That was when he'd called me.

I watched his face intently. "I'm going to ask you one question, Butcher, and I want a straight answer. Did you kill Laidlaw?"

"I swear on my mother's life, no. He was dead when I got there." His face was alive with emotion. "I know how it looks, Jake, but I swear I didn't do it. I may have gotten carried away and said a few things, but I didn't mean them. By the time I got over to Laidlaw's, I was cool. I just wanted to talk to him, find out what he intended to do. I never meant to hurt him."

I believed him. Maybe because I wanted to. If he hadn't done it, I hadn't helped him. "What time did you get to Laidlaw's?"

"Ten twenty. I know, because I looked at my watch."

"What time did you call your wife?"

"Just before I called you."

"How long were you in the apartment?"

He shrugged. "However long it took to see him and get out

of there. Maybe a minute or so."

"Did you touch anything?"

He thought about it and winced. "The door handle. I'm not sure what else."

"Did anyone see you leaving?"

"I don't know. I don't think so." He came forward on the couch, grabbed my arm, and said in a tremulous voice, "You gotta help me prove I didn't do it. Please—"

I nodded and tried to sound soothing. "If you're telling the truth, we'll get you out from under. But first, you have to turn yourself in. Do you have an attorney?"

He shook his head. "Not for this sort of thing."

I nodded and picked up the phone and roused Larry Ellman out of bed. He grumbled a lot, but agreed to meet us at his Century City office tomorrow morning at eight. On my advice, Butcher retained Larry as his counsel, at least until morning. Larry then hired me to investigate the case, so that the cops could not force me to give them anything that might incriminate his client.

After another hour of listening to Butcher whine about how his wife could do such a thing to him, I found my eyes closing involuntarily. Fortunately, the vodka that I'd been plying him with in an effort to get him to

sleep had by that time started to take effect.

I fetched him a pillow and blanket and let him fend for himself. My couch was too short for his body, but I figured he might as well get used to it. Jailhouse beds were not king-sized, as I could tell him from experience.

I got up at seven the next morning to find Butcher had abandoned the couch for the floor. That was probably good practice, too. He showered while I made coffee, and after three cups each, I drove him over to Larry Ellman's office.

Larry was waiting for us. He listened intently while Butcher repeated his story, interrupting to ask an occasional question, then pulled me into a conference room. "Think he's telling the truth?"

"Yeah, I do," I said.

He nodded. "So do I. I'm going to let them put him on the lie box. In the meantime, I'm going to arrange for our own polygraph expert."

"You think they'll charge him?"

"Not for seventy-two hours," he said, scowling. "Before you got here, I talked to the Santa Monica detective who's handling the case—Whiteside. I told him I was coming in with Butcher at ten. He confirmed

there's a warrant out for him. Said he's only wanted for questioning, but they think he's their man, all right. They'll want to talk to you, too, but let 'em find you. No sense making it easy for them."

I wished Butcher good luck and used one of Larry's extensions to call Joe Exizian at the *Chronicle*. Not only did he know Butcher but because of his father's wrestling background, he kept up on the scene.

He listened intently as I told him about Butcher's arrest, then said, "Jake, I'm sorry about this. When Butcher came to me, I had no idea what it was about. If I had, I wouldn't have gotten you involved."

"It's not your fault."

"I can't believe Butcher would go off the deep end like that."

"He says he didn't."

I recited the story Butcher had told me, and he said, "I've known Butcher a long time. If he says that's what happened, I'm inclined to believe him. That's easier for me to believe than rearranging my entire picture of him. You think he's guilty?"

"The cops do. And his adoring wife does. I'm withholding judgment, but I'm operating on the assumption he's not. That isn't going to help him much, though, unless I can come up with something more solid than

character witnesses. Like a motive. Who else would have had a reason to snuff Laidlaw?"

"You want a computer print-out?"

"You're telling me the man was not loved?"

He proceeded to lay it out for me. Up until a few years ago, the country had been cut up into well-defined fiefdoms in which wrestling promoters had operated without fear of competition. But then Laidlaw had come along and changed all that. Seven years ago, he had begun to spread out from his base in the Midwest in an attempt to go national. His imperialistic designs became apparent when he began to buy up time on TV cable networks and put on shows in other promoters' territories. He out-carried the carnies by amping up the level of hype and by providing more outrageous images for his wrestlers, and within three years, he managed to build his IWF into a coast-to-coast wrestling empire.

Alarmed by dwindling audiences and the defection of their biggest wrestling draws to the Laidlaw camp, the heads of the other wrestling federations, led by West Coast wrestling promoter Helene Brennan, had gotten together in an attempt to organize a "stop Laidlaw" movement, but the effort had

broken down in internecine squabbling.

"You think one of his competitors could have taken it upon himself to 'stop Laidlaw' permanently?"

"I don't know. All I know is the man had a lot of enemies. He was a ruthless businessman who didn't care who he stepped on to get what he wanted."

"Where can I talk to this Helene Brennan?"

"She would be in her office at the Galaxy Auditorium. She owns the place."

The Galaxy was on Los Angeles Street, on the edge of Skid Row. It had been around since the thirties, one of the few small arenas to survive from that period. At night it looked shabby, but in the light of day, without the distraction of the activity in the ring, it looked downright dismal. A couple of winos stood underneath the marquee as I drove up, drinking their breakfasts from brown paper sacks and watching the man on the ladder taking down the letters announcing last night's boxing card. I ignored their entreaties for spare change as I walked by them, and their curses followed me through the front door.

The interior decor of the place was in keeping with its external facade. The rank smells of the crowd, of spilled beer and

sweat, had seeped into every corner of the place. Two ex-pugs moved between the seats sweeping up the debris left by last night's patrons. I asked one of them where I could find Helene Brennan, and he directed me to a tunnel off the side of the ring.

As I walked down the tunnel, a door at the end opened and a big, muscularly-built man limped out, his left leg braced by a cane. His red hair was crew cut, and with his moon-shaped, freckled face, he looked like a giant, gimpy Howdy Doody doll. I asked him if Helene Brennan was inside, and he smiled distractedly and said yes, she was. I went past him, through the door.

The office was strictly no-frills, a desk, some filing cabinets, a couple of chairs. The pea-green walls were decorated with old posters of past gladiatorial battles, both wrestling and boxing.

Helene Brennan, wearing a navy blue pin-striped suit, sat behind the desk. Her long face was unlined and youthful, but her fifty-odd years showed in the streaks of gray in her short-cropped hair. She smiled, but the eyes that peered at me over the top of her half-glasses told another story. They were cold and hard as slate.

I introduced myself and she

put the glasses on the desktop, sat back, and waved me into a chair. "You said on the phone you're working for Butcher Baker's attorney."

"That's right."

She sighed regretfully. "I like Butcher. Too bad he had to be the one."

"The one what?"

"To kill Laidlaw. It was inevitable that someone did it sooner or later."

"Why is that?"

"Because the guy was a shark, that's why."

"I hear you tried to organize other wrestling promoters recently, to try to put Laidlaw out of business," I said.

She came forward in her chair and folded her hands on the desktop. On one of her slender fingers was a diamond the size of a golfball. "Laidlaw was trying to put the rest of us out of business. What we were doing was strictly self defense."

She pursed her lips and sized me up, trying to determine if I could comprehend what she was going to say. "Wrestling used to be clean, orderly. In some sports, you have to have iron-clad contracts, but in wrestling, business has always been conducted with handshakes and telephone calls. You didn't have to worry about other promoters trying to cut your throat or your wrestlers going over the wall.

Laidlaw came along and changed all that. He stole other promoters' prime acts and over-saturated TV markets, just to eat into the local live gate and force a few of the smaller promoters to go belly-up. After that, he would pick up the pieces and rebuild. It worked in a few areas, and some of the other local promoters expressed concern. I tried to organize them to provide a stronger united front against the IWF."

"It didn't work out?" I asked.

She smiled tightly. "Wrestling is a free-wheeling business, full of free-wheeling people. Everybody has his own ideas about how to go about things."

"Was one of the ideas that someone go shark fishing?"

Her voice took on an obstinate tone. "If you're implying that Laidlaw was knocked off by the competition, forget it. Sure, he caused some problems. But things would have stabilized, even if he hadn't been killed. Some of the defectors were already becoming disillusioned and were coming back with their tails between their legs. At first, a lot of them only saw the money Laidlaw was waving at them. But then they saw what he wanted for that money."

I bit. "What?"

"Everything," she said.

"Laidlaw was a dictator. You wrestled for him, you did what he told you; otherwise, you were out. If he told you to change your image, you changed your image, you became what he wanted. If he told you to file your teeth down to points and bite the heads off live chickens in the ring, you did it or you didn't work. If he told you he wanted juice, you gave him juice—"

"Juice?"

"Blood. Nothing gets a crowd worked up like the sight of blood. The faces of some of Laidlaw's wrestlers are a mass of scar tissue where they've used razor blades to satisfy Laidlaw's lust for blood. If a wrestler refused to bleed, he didn't work for Laidlaw. If Laidlaw controlled the territory, that meant he didn't work."

"What happens now that Laidlaw is out of the way?"

She shrugged. "Things go back to the way they used to be."

I couldn't believe that. "How does his empire get cut up?"

Her stare didn't waver. "That will have to be worked out." She glanced at her watch. "I have an appointment."

I didn't know if she did or not, but it was a clear signal that the interview was over. I thanked her for her time and left.

I called Larry Ellman. Butcher had passed on the police lie box, but they were holding him for seventy-two hours, anyway. Larry figured they would charge him with murder at the end of that time. They were that sure of their case.

The coroner had set the time of death between ten and one A.M. The cause of death was a broken neck, and from the way it had been broken, the killer had obviously been a very strong man. They had lifted a couple of Butcher's prints from the inside of Laidlaw's apartment, and the old man with the Pomeranian had positively identified Butcher. Although not compelled to testify against her husband, Shelley Baker seemed more than happy to do so. She had told the cops that Butcher had been in a rage and, before leaving the house that night, had said he was going over to kill Laidlaw. In other words, they had motive, opportunity, and weapon, everything they needed to hang him, and Butcher's loving wife was apparently willing to help them slip the noose around his twenty inch neck. Domestic cases—I loved them.

It probably should not have been so hard to accept that the Most Evil Man in the World was capable of murder, but somehow, I couldn't. I bought

a copy of *Wrestling Digest* from the market newsstand and drove to Santa Monica.

Starting with the bottom floor, I rang the doorbell of every apartment in Laidlaw's building. Besides the old man with the Pomeranian, nobody had seen Butcher that night. The lady in 519, however, a Mrs. Rose Aquino, had seen someone else.

Shortly after ten, Mrs. Aquino came in from a dinner out with friends. As she stepped on the elevator to go upstairs, she was passed by a very large, muscularly-built man in a cowboy hat, who was getting off the elevator. She could not identify Butcher from his picture—the man had held the brim of the hat with one hand, pulling it down and shielding his face from view—but her description, including the cowboy hat, could have matched Butcher's. The only thing that didn't match was the fact that the man she had seen had used a cane and walked with a noticeable limp.

I called the Galaxy and was told that Helene Brennan had gone for the day. Joe was still at his desk, working on a piece on Pete Rose. I described the man with the cane I'd seen coming out of Helene Brennan's office, and he said without hesitation, "Billy the Kid. He was IWF champion up until

four months ago, when Karpzov the Russian Bear took the title from him. His leg got broken in that match. There was some talk about it at the time."

"What kind of talk?"

He shrugged. "That it might not have been an accident."

"Are you saying this Karpzov broke the guy's leg intentionally?"

"Naw. Wrestlers get hurt all the time. It comes with the territory. You get three hundred pounds flying off the top strand of the ropes and landing on someone, it better land just right or something has to give."

"You know who started the rumor?"

"No, but I figure it was put out by Laidlaw's people, to try to hype the rematch."

I mulled that over. "What's the story on this Billy the Kid?"

"The ultimate babyface. He espouses the virtues of Americanism and clean living and actually embodies them in real life. Strangely enough, that might be his biggest handicap."

"Why is that?"

"He refuses to resort to theatrics, says he has a responsibility to his young fans to provide them with a clean, wholesome image, not pander to their baser instincts. His motives might be noble, but it makes for a horribly bland interview, and it showed in his gates. People

weren't coming to see his matches. Too bad, because the Kid is really a terrific technician in the ring. Before he turned pro, he was with the U.S. team. Took a silver in the Pan Am games a few years ago."

"Where can I find him? And what's his real name?"

"Billy Diomartich. I think he's been helping out Red Lamber at Red's wrestling school in Burbank since he got hurt." He eyed me craftily. "Why the interest in Billy?"

I shrugged. "Just touching bases."

He shook his head. "Leave the cliches to me. I can make people swallow them."

I told him not to worry, that if I found out something he would get it first, then asked him about Helene Brennan. He confirmed my impression of the woman—hard as nails—and scoffed at her contention of a growing tide of defections from the IWF. The other promoters were in trouble, including Brennan. With Laidlaw out of the way, he predicted a cage match for the pieces, with Brennan coming out the victor, at least on the West Coast.

When I asked him if he had a number for the Russian Bear, his eyes grew slyly curious again. "What do you want with Karpzov?"

I grinned and winked at him. "With a little luck, I might be able to convince him I'm with the KGB."

Karpzov the Russian Bear answered the front door of his modest West L.A. house wearing an apron with a little red devil on it and holding a barbecue fork. He was a massive, barrel-chested man with a shaved head and a bushy dark mustache waxed at the ends.

He invited me into the living room with an accent that sounded more like Brooklyn than the Ukraine. A sliding glass door looked out onto the flagstone patio where a group of his colleagues and their wives sat laughing and drinking beer around a barbecue on which huge steaks charred.

"A friendly gathering of heels," he said, smiling.

I recognized quite a few of the faces from the magazine I'd bought. I felt as if I'd stumbled into a meeting of the Politburo. Such a congregation of evil could only be plotting some major villainy, perhaps the overthrow of the entire free world.

Karpzov's dark eyes turned serious. "Too bad Butcher can't be here. Does it look bad for him?"

"It doesn't look good," I answered truthfully. "That's why

I'm here. You might be able to help."

"Me?" he exclaimed, waving the fork in the air. "What kind of help can I be?"

"Heard from Billy the Kid lately?"

His dark eyes searched mine. "Yeah, as a matter of fact. That crazy bastard called here last night. Why?"

"What time did he call?"

"About eight thirty, I guess."

"What did he want?"

"Who knows? Like I said, the guy is whacko."

"What did he say?"

He shrugged. "Crazy crap. That he knew I'd broken his leg on purpose, that Helene Brennan had told him. He said he was going to get his title back, then he was going to take care of me for what I did to him. He sounded really out of it."

"What did you tell him?"

"That he was nuts, that it was an accident. He wouldn't listen, just hung up. Nuts."

"Is he nuts?"

His eyes narrowed. "Whad-dya mean?"

"Was it an accident?"

He snapped angrily, "Sure it was an accident. Laidlaw told me to spank Billy, but I never meant to hurt him that bad."

"Spank?"

"Punish."

"Punish, as in hurt?"

His face turned sullen and he fell silent.

"I'm only asking for Butcher. If the cops make the case against him, he can pull twenty years."

He frowned. "What's Billy got to do with it?"

"One of Laidlaw's neighbors can put him in Laidlaw's apartment building around the time of the murder."

Karpzov's mouth dropped open. "Damn."

"How about it?"

He thought for a moment, and said, "I was only supposed to slam the Kid around some. He got hurt because he moved wrong. That's what he got for wrestling for real."

"What do you mean, 'for real'?"

"The kid had gone flippo. He wasn't drawing flies with his all-American rap, and Laidlaw wanted him to step down as champion and become a heel. Billy flat-out refused. He wouldn't change his image and he wouldn't give up the championship. He said nobody could beat him if he didn't want them to, he was the best, and he'd prove it. He started wrestling for real. He'd pin a guy in the first minute of a match. The audiences hated it. They wanted to see some heat."

"So Laidlaw told you to take him out."

"Yeah. Laidlaw pretended to go along with Billy and arranged a match between us. He told me he wanted Billy taught a lesson. But like I said, I never

intended to break his leg. It was just one of those things."

"Did Brennan know about your arrangement with Laidlaw?"

He shook his head. "I don't know how she could have."

I thought about it. I was fairly sure now about the identity of Butcher's anonymous pen pal. Somewhere in the dank, odoriferous recesses of the Galaxy Auditorium was a typewriter whose type would match that on the note. "Maybe it was just good guesswork."

His eyes widened. "You think she told him on purpose, to get him to go after Laidlaw?"

"It would be a neat way to get rid of the competition."

He turned to stare out at the company of villains on the patio. "I've always said you can't trust babyfaces. They're all screwball egomaniacs."

"Better not say that on the air," I told him. "Your audiences might get confused. *Das vedaneya*."

He looked at me uncomprehendingly. "Huh?"

"That's Russian for 'good-bye,'" I told him.

"Oh," he said, nodding. "Sure. I knew that."

Red Lambier's wrestling school was in the gym of the Burbank YMCA. Four weeks of intensive training in how to take a fall without breaking

your neck. Steve Laidlaw should have taken the course. Even then, it probably wouldn't have helped.

Two burly sentinels guarded the doors of the gym, and I was forced to do some skulking to find a back door that was open.

A ring was set up on the middle of the basketball floor, and Diomartich was hanging over the ropes, orchestrating two Gorgeous Georges in tights. "Okay. Side toss, armlock, kick out, end with a flying tackle blowoff."

I came up behind and said: "Billy the Kid?"

His attention remained focused on the ring. "Yeah?"

"My name is Asch. I'm a private investigator in the employ of Butcher Baker's attorney. I'd like to ask you a couple of questions."

He turned to look at me. His eyes were big and blue, like Howdy Doody's. Except, unlike Howdy Doody, he wasn't smiling. "What kind of questions?"

"Like what you were doing at Steve Laidlaw's last night?"

His freckled face grew taut. "Who says I was?"

"I do. Plus a couple of witnesses who saw you there."

He said to the two giants slamming each other into the mat: "Okay, you guys, you can knock off."

The two climbed out of the ring, and when they were gone,

he said, avoiding my gaze, "I went over to see Laidlaw, but he was alive when I left."

"What did you talk about?"

"My rematch with Karpzov." He spat the Russian's name.

"What did he tell you?"

He touched his freckled nose and looked away. "It was going to be set up as soon as my leg healed."

"You're lying," I said. "There wasn't going to be a rematch. Laidlaw was going to make sure of that. How could two heels wrestle each other? That's what he wanted you to be, wasn't it?"

He glared at me, his mouth a tight, angry line. "I told him I wouldn't do it. He wanted to make me into a freak."

"So you killed him."

His eyes clouded and he shook his head. He seemed suddenly confused, disoriented. "No . . ."

"You were angry over what Helene Brennan told you, that Laidlaw had Karpzov break your leg on purpose, so you killed him—"

He glowered at me. "Butcher did it."

"He might have, if you hadn't gotten there first. Helene Brennan used him just like she used you—"

He snarled: "You keep your mouth shut about Ms. Brennan."

"Is she your manager now?"

"That's right," he said defensively. "She's going to help me get the title back. She understands how important it is, what kind of a threat they pose."

He had lost me. "Threat? What threat?"

"To Americanism," he said seriously.

I stared at him incredulously. "Who are 'they'?"

"Laidlaw, Karpzov, Butcher, all of them. They're agents of evil, trying to undermine the morality of the nation. Ms. Brennan understands that for the good of the country, for the world, I have to get the title back."

"You're putting me on," I said, and immediately regretted it. All it took was one look in those eyes with white showing all around the irises to tell that he wasn't kidding. Karpzov was right. The kid was screaming Fruit Loops. I didn't know when his mind had snapped, before or after he had given Laidlaw three hundred sixty degree vision, but it was certainly gone now.

A flame of thought spontaneously ignited behind his eyes. "You're one of them."

"Me?" I said, backing up. "No. I'm a double agent. I've been working undercover for the FBI and the CIA, trying to clean out this nest of vipers—"

He started limping after me.

"You're going to try to make my fans believe I'm a bad person—"

"I wouldn't do a thing like that," I tried to assure him as I glanced behind me. "I have orders from the president himself to make sure you get the title back."

He wasn't listening. His fingers were flexing, and he loosened his arms and shoulders as he weaved steadily toward me. I made a move toward the door, but with astonishing quickness, he darted sideways, cutting me off. There were bubbles of saliva at the corners of his leering mouth. I had made one very bad judgment call, and now I was going to pay for it. Killed by a two hundred eighty pound homicidal Howdy Doody. I had time to get out one cry for help before he sprang.

I pivoted as I let the punch go, timing it perfectly so that it landed with all my one hundred and ninety-five pounds flush on the point of the chin. That stopped him cold—for about a second and a half. I jabbed twice more, opening a small cut above his right eye, then he grabbed my wrist and pulled me toward him. For me at least, the old boxing-wrestling debate was settled.

I struggled uselessly as he worked me into a half-nelson. A massive, python-like arm slithered around my head and

began forcing my neck down. I tried to yell, but my voice was constricted into an ineffectual gurgle. I reached behind me, searching for an eye before he snapped my neck like a chicken's; then there was a lot of shouting and trampling of feet, and suddenly the pressure on my neck was released.

I looked up to see Karpzov and four of the villains from the barbecue on the floor, holding down a wildly thrashing Billy the Kid.

"You really can't tell who the good guys are any more," I commented hoarsely, rubbing my throat.

"I talked to one of the detectives today," Butcher said, taking a swig of his beer. "He says Billy probably won't do any prison time for killing Laidlaw."

I shrugged. "He might as well be in prison. He thinks he's being held in a Communist prison camp, and that the doctors who come to talk to him are trying to brainwash him."

He shook his head sorrowfully. "Scary, how a guy could flip out like that, and believe all this stuff."

I nodded. "Thanks for the tickets tonight, by the way. And the check."

"You kidding? You saved my

ass." He hesitated and looked down at his beer, embarrassed. "Shelley and I are giving it another try."

I nodded again.

"She isn't a bad girl," he added, seemingly needing to explain.

I didn't say anything. It was his life. Besides, I didn't want to spoil the moment for him. Just an hour before, I'd watched from my front row seat as Butcher Baker and the Russian Bear had pummeled the Blond Adonis and Wonderful Walter, winning the IWF tag team championship. They had cheated, of course, but what the hell, a victory was a victory.

I finished my drink and we shook hands and I went outside. I thought about the crowd tonight, booing and throwing beer cups and insults, demanding a rematch. They had felt the force

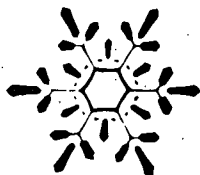
of every one of Butcher's low blows. They were all the punches they had taken from bosses, from husbands and wives, from the unseen hands that kept them down and prevented them from getting what they wanted out of life. But that would change.

Butcher Baker might have been on top tonight, by the devious force of his malevolent will, but they had gone home, secure in the knowledge that soon there would be other nights, in other cities, where he would get his come-uppance. The scales of justice would balance, the forces of Right would rally and triumph.

I wondered if Billy the Kid was comforted by that thought in his padded cell in Atascadero. For that was the way things always worked out in life, wasn't it?



Give a gift of **ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE**



Why give knick-knacks for Christmas when for a stocking stuffer of a price, you can give your friends spine-tingling mystery, suspense, and intrigue. Delivered thirteen times throughout the coming year in the pages of **Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine**.



Once-a year holiday rates are now in effect. The first subscription to **Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine** costs only **\$17.97**. Each additional subscription is even less—just **\$14.97**



And you can complete your **Alfred Hitchcock** gift giving in a matter of minutes. Just fill out the form below or if you prefer, call us with your order **toll free: 1-800-333-3311**

Gift subscriptions received by December 1st will start at the holiday season. Orders that arrive subsequently will begin with the current issue. Greeting cards will be sent to announce your gift.

Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine is also available at these holiday rates. The first subscription costs only **\$17.97**, each additional subscription is only **\$14.97**.



Mail To:
Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine
P.O. Box 7055
Red Oak, Iowa 51591



☐ Payment Enclosed
check desired title(s)
Alfred Hitchcock ☐ Ellery Queen ☐

☐ Bill me after January 1.

Gift For:

Bill To:

Name _____

Name _____

Address _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

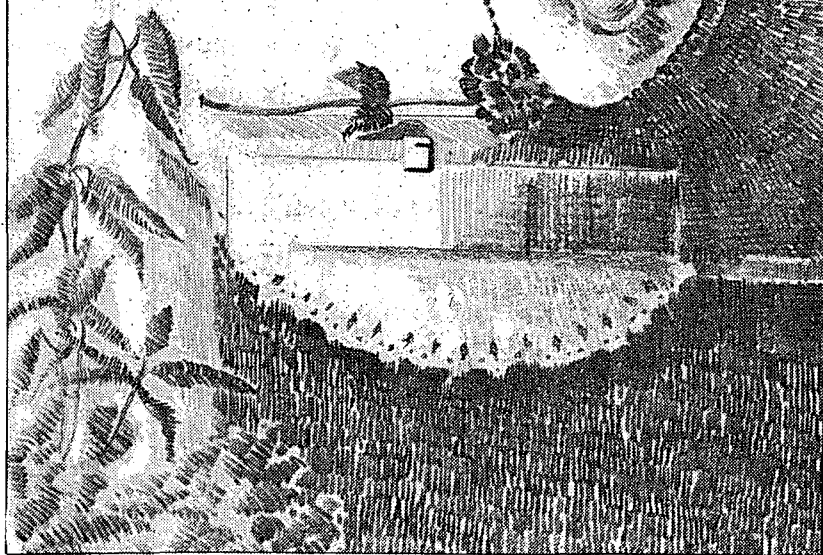
City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Sign Gift Card _____

YBSC-0

—My— Trouble

—by
—Molly
MacRae



My mother came to live with me in November. Which is only really interesting if you consider that she died in October. No, she isn't a ghost. I'm not haunted. Give me some credit, we aren't that sort of people.

She's in the closet on the shelf. You know, it's funny, I'd never realized how heavy the remains of a hundred and eighty pound woman would be. She's in a neat, shiny, brown plastic box about the size of an economy-size Kleenex box. It's pretty hefty. It's sealed; otherwise I suppose accidents might happen. One of the cats would get up there and push it off the shelf, for instance, and it would fall and open up and all hell would break loose, figuratively speaking, and possibly literally speaking depending on where . . . oh well, never mind.

My sister Bitsy (we *are* that sort of people, I'm afraid) wanted to keep Mother at her house until all the far-flung relatives meet down in Georgia for the burial this summer. She couldn't handle it, though. She and Mother were very close, and it bothered Bitsy to have that trivial looking brown plastic remainder of her in the house. She would rather contemplate Mother serenely floating somewhere in the spiritual hereafter than sitting someplace where she might have to shove her aside to find the extra vacuum cleaner bags.

Bitsy, needless to say, thinks I'm crass for treating Mother's presence with such nonchalance. I don't. It's just that at last I can relax because I finally know exactly where Mother is and what she isn't doing.

She isn't, for instance, sitting on the sofa telling me that I ought to lose weight. She also isn't explaining to me how I should be using my MBA for something other than running a second-hand bookstore. That the second-hand books I deal in are usually first editions and often rare, cost the earth and usually fetch it, didn't, to her mind, make up for the fact that I sell merchandise and operate out of my living room. Once, when I got wind of one of her infrequent and always unannounced visits, I screwed a red light bulb into the porch light. I'm sure it only served to cement her convictions.

"Your mother never really did much for you, did she?" That was my mother's cousin meowing over the garden fence soon after Mother's death. "She was always coming down on you in favor of Bitsy."

"Well now, Leona." I tried to pour oil on these acrid waters. "I wouldn't go so far as to say that."

"And that's your trouble," snapped Leona and tottered away on her seventy-five-year-old toothpicks.

I snapped off the dead head of a rose and stared after her. Leona was probably right. Mother's presence in my life was no great windfall. But I've never dwelt on that, and I don't think my lack of publicly-aired grievances is my trouble.

Leona sounds like it, but she really isn't a nasty old lady. She just tries to improve me by telling me what my trouble is. She pinpoints a new one every so often, though she's most fond of telling me that I don't smile or laugh often enough.

Actually my most immediate trouble was finding a ride to the opening of an acquaintance's new restaurant over in the next town. My car was in quarantine, suffering from some near fatal fuel-pump-warp-speed-function-failure or something.

I thought Bitsy and her husband Rodney might like to go, and so I called and asked her over for a cup of coffee. You can't just ask Bitsy a favor, you have to approach her the right way.

"Oh, no, no, no, I don't think so, Margaret. You certainly aren't going, are you? You are! I can tell by the way you're trying not to blush. Margaret, Mother died only last month."

"I know, Bitsy. But I think it would be good for all of us, and it would be nice to help make the opening a success. We could just make an appearance."

Bitsy started fiddling with her rings, something she does when she's aggravated. She slips them off and puts them down and then slips them back on again, over and over. It drives me crazy. I could see my cause was already lost, so I decided to aggravate her a bit more.

"You could just be yourself, you wouldn't even have to have fun."

She slammed her rings back on and arranged her face to show me that she was not amused. "Why don't you go with your friend what's-his-name?"

She knew why I didn't want to go with what's-his-name, whose name is Gene. Gene is my very dear friend who has a Lamborghini and a drinking problem. It's hard to believe that the two coexist for one person, but Gene is responsible enough to know when he's had enough, and he never drives his jewel drunk. He also never lets anyone else drive it even if they are sober.

I try not to encourage Gene to go places where he'll fail. It means we sometimes don't go places together, though we often end up there together. He doesn't need my encouragement.

"Why don't you get Gene to drive you?" Bitsy is offended by any sort of moral failing. She left and went next door to call on Leona. I can guess what they had to talk about.

Gene called later that morning while I was checking through a newly arrived collection of W.W. Jacobs first editions.

"How's your car?" He had driven me home when I'd had to leave it in intensive care.

"If it doesn't respond soon, I might have to consider euthanasia."

"Well, don't despair, I've got great news for you. I've got strep throat."

"That's wonderful. Why are we thrilled?"

"I'm on penicillin. No drinking."

This is true. Gene is an amazing drunk. He won't stop because his doctor or his mother or I ask him to, but he'll read on a bottle of penicillin that drugs and alcohol shouldn't be mixed so he quits drinking for the duration. You figure it out. Anyway, that was fine and we made glorious plans. He would wear his tweed jacket with the penicillin in his pocket. I would wear my small black, an outfit so called because, though I look stunning in it, it is on the snug side.

Then Bitsy phoned to ask if she had left her rings behind on the kitchen table. I said no, because she hadn't.

"Margaret, are you sure?" That question doesn't sound like what it really was. In fact, it was a thinly veiled accusation suggesting that I might have found the rings and kept them. I'm very sensitive about that sort of thing. When I was a child I did pick up pretty things that caught my eye. Then I was caught. I was about seven, I guess, and I've yet to live it down.

"Margaret?"

There isn't any satisfying answer for that kind of question. I've found the plain and simple ones are best. "No, Bitsy."

Bitsy came over to check for herself. I met her at the door, I in my small black, and she in a snit.

"Margaret, I can't imagine what has happened to my rings."

"Neither can I." Gene drove up at that point, and you could see her thoughts tripping over each other trying to take in the implications of my outfit and Gene's appearance.

"Do you have another ride home?"

Plain and simple. "No."

"Is he going to let you drive?"

"No."

"Well, you're certainly not going to let him drive after he's gotten drunk, are you?"

"When he's had too much he spends the night."

"And what are you going . . . then you're going to spend . . ."

Her indignity went into hyperdrive and she started to splutter. I enjoyed the display of her outraged sensibilities so much that I just left her thinking what she would and climbed in beside Gene. He honked a merry goodbye that made her jump.

The opening couldn't have been lovelier. The food was delicious and my small black got smaller yet. There was live piano music and impromptu singing. But damned if I didn't get a boiling headache. Gene was gallant and drove me home, promising to call in the morning to see how I was doing.

I always leave one or two low-watt lights burning at night. I operate on the theory that one doesn't hear strange noises if it isn't dark. I was in the bathroom swallowing a couple of industrial grade aspirin when that theory was blown right out of the water. Someone was in the living room.

I'd locked the doors. I know I'd done that because I always do that because I'm very careful about doing that because I am mortally terrified of the dark and all things associated with it like people breaking into my house at night.

Footsteps were coming towards the bedroom.

I slipped quietly from the bathroom into the closet, hoping that my small black would help me blend right into the corner. I could just barely, over the sound of my heart crashing around in my throat, hear someone rummaging through the drawers of my desk and then my bureau.

The closet door started to open.

I'm good at assessing a situation with lightning speed and coming up with the appropriate solution. I reached over my head and grabbed from the shelf the first heavy box my hand touched and I brought that sucker down hard.

I was standing there still feeling stunned when two policemen arrived. Leona was behind them.

"It's a good thing I put the cat out when I did. I saw someone crawling in through your kitchen window and called the police. That's your trouble. You should have a burglar alarm. Who is it, anyway?"

Bitsy sat up, moaning and holding her head.

"Did this woman break into your house, ma'am?"

"I think maybe there's been a mistake, officer."

Leona helped Bitsy to sit on the bed. The police looked askance at the three of us and left.

"By the way, Bitsy, you left these on my coffee table." Leona dug around in her apron pocket and produced Bitsy's rings. Bitsy moaned again. She grabbed the rings and ran out the front door. Leona and I watched her go.

"What did you hit her with, anyway?"

I looked down at my hand. I was still holding the box. Leona looked at it.

"Hmph. The first time your mother's come down on Bitsy in favor of you." And she stalked away.

I went back to the bathroom and took a couple more aspirin. I brushed my teeth. I put on my pajamas. I crawled under the covers. And I laughed myself to sleep.

DID YOU MISS A KEY ISSUE? BACK ISSUES AVAILABLE

ALFRED
HITCHCOCK
MYSTERY MAGAZINE



LAST CHANCE TO UNLOCK MORE MYSTERIES IN ALFRED HITCHCOCK. CHECK OFF TODAY THE ALFRED HITCHCOCK BACK ISSUES THAT YOU'D LIKE, AND MAIL WITH YOUR CHECK OR MONEY ORDER. ORDERS TAKEN ON FIRST-COME, FIRST-SERVED BASIS. HURRY! LIMITED SUPPLY AVAILABLE.

ISSUES \$3.50 each

January 1988	<input type="checkbox"/>
February 1988	<input type="checkbox"/>
March 1988	<input type="checkbox"/>
April 1988	<input type="checkbox"/>
May 1988	<input type="checkbox"/>
June 1988	<input type="checkbox"/>
July 1988	<input type="checkbox"/>
August 1988	<input type="checkbox"/>
September 1988	<input type="checkbox"/>
October 1988	<input type="checkbox"/>
November 1988	<input type="checkbox"/>
December 1988	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mid-December 1988	<input type="checkbox"/>

MAIL TO



ALFRED
HITCHCOCK
P.O. Box 40
Vernon, New Jersey
07462

☐ Enclosed is check or money order for \$
(Cost includes postage and handling)
Make checks payable to **ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
MYSTERY MAGAZINE**

Name _____

Street/No. _____

City _____

State _____

Zip _____

HBKC-0

Please allow 4 to 6 weeks for delivery

FICTION



Singapore Assassin

by Ross
McCauley

Illustration by Peggy Ranson

50

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Turf Bar was wooden panels on the wall and Yorkshire bitter on tap. An oasis of contrived Englishness in the heart of a concrete highrise in the concrete heart of Singapore.

Outside modern Singapore hummed politely and optimistically by. Hunter had been coming here from Sydney for just a few years, but already he had seen much of the old Singapore disappear. Bum boats replaced by wharfside cranes. Arabtown, Indiatown, and most of Chinatown replaced by office blocks. Old Chinese traders with their abacuses replaced by young ones with their silicon chips.

By the time he had finished his business here, another piece of old Singapore would also be dead.

Even the famous Turf Bar had changed. The Irish thoroughbreds under English silks still looked down from gilded frames. But the English themselves had gone. They had given Singapore back to the Singaporeans. The crazy Australians had gone, along with the loud Germans. Only a few of the American oilmen remained, and most of them seemed to be here in the bar this afternoon.

The bar girls stayed. And grew older.

Hunter whistled up another beer, which the barman pulled from a long brass pub handle. One of the tubby girls, squeezed into red silk, carried it across to his table with a mama's smile. She wasn't looking for business, just being friendly. Hunter dismissed her with a cold flick of his head. The girl rolled back to the bar. She said something that made the other girls laugh and some of the oilmen, too.

Hunter was edgy. His contact was late.

His view around the bar was suddenly blocked by the Singaporean Indian who slunk through the frosted swing doors, moved directly to his table, and gestured to the cheap briefcase under his arm. "Rolex? Dunhill? Pierre Cardin?"

Hunter shook his head.

But the watch seller insisted. He opened the briefcase on the table to display the trays of watches, all Taiwan copy, all perfect enough to be worn anywhere in the west with conviction.

Hunter pointed to the gold Rolex copy already on his wrist. "Piss off."

"Please, sir, I have a very excellent good watch to interest you," the watch seller said.

He lifted the tray. On the floor of the briefcase lay an automatic pistol, sleek and black. Alongside it an envelope.

Hunter pocketed the automatic and the envelope. He overpaid

the watch seller a reluctant ninety-five dollars for another copy gold watch he would never use. The watch man would have already been paid well enough as a message carrier by their mutual employer, but it was wise to keep up the cover.

"Choke on it," Hunter whispered.

"Have a nice day, sir," the Singaporean grinned back.

The envelope held half his fee and the keys to an Avis car.

It was dark when Hunter parked the rental at the jungle's edge. A January monsoon wind had just finished tipping a bucket over the island. It was silent except for the sudden and sporadic plunk of water drops plopping down from one fat green leaf to the next. After the bustling electricity of the city, the dark loneliness of the central island was eerie.

He crunched up the path to C. C. Hau's verandahed colonial style house. Its white walls glowed in the moonlight. No lights shone from within.

Old C. C. Hau was as famous as he was complex. As a Hong Kong-born British citizen, he had represented England as a gold medal Olympic archer in his youth. Later he had befriended Mao and the people's revolution. Now he was a wealthy and powerful trader operating an intricate network of ships and trade houses throughout Southeast Asia.

Yet he lived in this faded stucco home like so many rich Chinese of older generations, simply and frugally despite his money and status.

According to Hunter's employers, C. C. Hau's unmarried daughter, who lived there with her own daughter, was in the city dining with her lover. Their two servants were at the Palace for the usual Tuesday night release of the latest Kung Fu movie from Hong Kong.

Only the old man and the child were at home. And his killer.

The plan was simple enough. Too simple, Hunter would suppose later. Just knock on the door. Gun the old man down when he opened it. Walk away with twenty thousand dollars.

Hunter didn't know why the old man was due to die. Nor did he care.

Inside the house, C. C. Hau was playing with his granddaughter. Lucy giggled as C. C. Hau fingered the tiger disc. If he moved that one she would win. The old man's fingers lingered over the tiger, then moved on.

She looked up into his face. As always his eyes were shut. Some-

times she was sure he could see and she would squeal, "You're peeking, goong-goong!" But he had told her his fingers were now his eyes. His fingers and his instinct.

Some years ago the muscles on C. C. Hau's eyelids had collapsed. The eyes themselves were fine, but crippled eyelids that could no longer open by themselves had suddenly plunged him into useless blackness.

Hunter circled the dark verandah, then stood before the door. He was dressed in loose tropical cottons, but his skin prickled with the start of tense sweat. He took the automatic from his pocket, checked it, tucked it down by his right thigh. He knocked. Nothing moved inside. He saw the big brass ring on the door post, yanked it, and heard the bell jangle inside.

That should wake up the old bugger, he thought.

Now he heard them: the scrapping of the slippers on the tiles as an old man shuffled toward the front door. The door opened quickly—no locks, no chains, just the simple turn of the handle—took him by surprise.

He thrust out the gun. The old man was framed in the doorway. Hunter shot. A hole as big as a fist opened in the old man's chest. It threw him backwards and spilled him across the terracotta tiles in the entrance foyer.

Hunter jumped astride the body, ready to fire again, but there was no life left.

Worse, it was the wrong man. One of the servants had stayed home this Tuesday.

In his study, C. C. Hau's head jerked in the direction of the shot. It was a sound he hadn't heard for many years, but it was a sound once heard never forgotten.

"Ssshhh," he whispered to his granddaughter.

Hunter was frozen over the dead man. Suddenly there was a Chinese voice on his right shoulder. Hunter spun at it, his gun out. There was nothing, only a wall.

The voice asked its question again, this time quietly.

Now Hunter saw it, a door leading off the entrance foyer.

"Come out here!" Hunter commanded. "Or I come in there."

There was no response. Hunter looked for a light switch, but he couldn't find one. It was then he noticed something strange. There were no lights throughout the entire house.

Years earlier, still full of rage at suddenly being plunged into the blackness, C. C. Hau had ordered all the light fittings ripped

out. If he had to live in the dark, so could others.

His rage had eventually ebbed into acceptance, but the house remained in darkness for no other reason than that he had never bothered to order the lights back on.

The house and its darkness scared Hunter. He had killed before but never for a trade.

He got his courage back by picturing the old man in his mind—frightened and alone and blind. Curled up in a chair. Or maybe squeezed under a bed or in a wardrobe. Unable to run, unable to fight. All Hunter had to do was find him.

Ignoring the stairway directly in front, he followed the passage off to the right. Halfway along there were doors on either side. He opened the first—it led back into the dining room he had just left. He grasped the handle of the door opposite and sprung it open. It was a small reading room stuffed with fat English leather armchairs.

At the end of the corridor he came to the kitchen: bright, white and alive with electricity. He clattered through the pantries and freezers, not surprised not to find anything.

C. C. Hau monitored his assassin's progress through the house. He was satisfied that whoever it was was working alone. He wished he were alone, too. That his granddaughter were somewhere else, somewhere safe.

But who was it? What was it? Why was it?

He recalled something Franklin Roosevelt once said. Mao liked it, too. "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

That eased his terror.

Perhaps it was time the man with the gun should catch the smell of fear.

Hunter, in the servants' quarters, heard something. Footsteps? A shuffle? Someone moving through the house.

He rushed back into the main house and tracked the footsteps to the foyer.

But the room was empty. Totally empty—the servant's dead body had gone.

Then he heard the shuffle-scrap of footsteps limping across the dining room. He rushed in. His eyes were now more accustomed to the dark, able to make out the shapes, even textures—but there was no one there.

He felt misplaced, out of depth. The landscape was different at night, foreign and frightening. He remembered that at least for him there was some light. There was none for his victim.

Hunter moved ruthlessly across the room and through a door on the opposite side, passing the kitchen again and around to the conservatory that stretched down the far side of the house.

A breeze rustled the potted palms. Their shadows quivered over the floor. Moonlight flashed in the eyes of a statue of a Chinese emperor. Hunter paused, wiped the sweat from his gun hand and his face. He hadn't felt so jumpy since night in Vietnam. The training returned and he began to tread more lightly.

He came to the gold-leaf lions on either side of the carved door and knew enough about the Strait Chinese to recognize they guarded the entrance to a temple.

He threw open the door and strode in. What he had forgotten was that the low-slung door, designed to force all who entered to bow, was also blocked with a board at its bottom to stop evil spirits from sneaking in. It sent Hunter sprawling. His pistol skated across the floor, clattering like mah-jongg tiles.

A Buddha's glare blazed down on him, thick traditional incense burned, a tape clinked out Chinese lutes and flutes. Hunter scampered across the floor on all fours to grab his gun.

Then he saw the old man, kneeling at a bench in front of the ancestral altar, his head bowed, his shoulders covered in an embroidered white silk gown.

Hunter, his eyes never leaving the old man's back, advanced, gun first.

"Got you, bastard!" he spat, and plunged the pistol against the gray head. The touch pushed the old man off his perch. He pitched to the floor, turning face up as he fell.

It was the body of the servant.

Hunter spun on his heel. The temple door locked shut. Lucy's little slippers scurried back to her grandfather.

Hunter threw himself at the door, hissing rage and fear through his clenched teeth. He pushed and punched at the timber. Eventually the ancient iron catch gave way.

Once out of the temple, the house was still and silent. The air was fresh after the heavy incense of the temple. Then, once again, he heard the slippered shuffle-scrap.

He dashed into the foyer. Again empty.

Did he hear it? Or did he feel it? He moved just in time and just enough. The huge Ming vase spinning down from the stairway above missed caving in his head and instead smashed into his shoulder.

Hunter now edged up the stairs one at a time, his hip sliding

against the balustrades with their carved, long-nosed, long-limbed Balinese dancers. His left collarbone was broken and he winced with the pain. His gun arm was still fine.

C. C. Hau heard him coming. Should he move, should he risk staying put?

Hunter slunk along the landing, opening each door in turn. At the third he was sure he heard a cough, just faintly inside.

Crouched low, he sprung the door. The man leapt in the air—crazy eyes, wild jumping yellow robes.

Hunter fired but the man kept dancing. He fired again. The crazy man still did not fall.

Hunter rushed forward. Suddenly there was no floor. His toes curled inside his shoes, his hand hit the door frame and managed a grip. His body quivering with adrenaline, Hunter looked down the ten meter drop to the garden below.

Safe, he now focused on the bright yellow Chinese kite with its painted mask, anchored to the frame of the french door, dancing in the night breeze.

The cough again. Here in this room. No one to be seen. He was sure he heard it. Was this house haunted? He peered into the moonlit blueness—nothing moved, nothing breathed.

Did he leave or did he finish the job? He'd already killed one man, but it was the wrong man so he still hadn't earned his money.

Hunter searched the upper floor without turning up anything except C. C. Hau's daughter's apartment, which, like the servants' quarters, had power and light. Still the main house was in darkness.

Lucy began to sob, just gently but enough to voice the deep, deep fear they both felt. Time was running out.

C. C. Hau had one more idea. Would he have the strength? Would he still have the skill?

He reached into the second drawer in his desk and his fingers found the Band-aids.

Lucy stared in amazement at what her grandfather was doing, but before she could say anything, the old man once more hushed her with a finger to her lips.

C. C. Hau took her hand and they crept out of his study.

Is this why they called her goong-goong a brave and clever man? she wondered.

It now dawned on Hunter that there was something wrong with the layout of the main building. In his mind he retraced his steps.

and realized that somewhere there was a central core to the structure he hadn't even touched.

He walked the corridors upstairs, this time running a hand delicately along the wall. He found it. In the daytime it would have been obvious enough, but in the night light it was difficult to see.

Again he crouched, listening, then he swung the door open. It was a perfectly square room, lined on two walls with a floor to ceiling library, the kind that had a ladder to reach the top shelves. In the center was a slab of Malaysian rosewood that served as a desk and, with it, a German designed ergonomic swivel chair in gray leather. Teleprinters connected to stock markets took up another wall.

Slowly he descended into the well that was the ground floor and went over to the desk. Under the lamplight he examined the table top. A personal computer with an abacus alongside. Butts of small cigars in a warm ashtray. Wooden buttons from a children's game. A little girl's doll lay next to a pair of scissors and a packet of Band-aids.

Then Hunter saw the bank of switches and speakers. It was a two-way intercom system for the house where the old man could monitor movement, call people, talk to them, and have them talk back.

It was from this desk he had whispered in Hunter's ear in the foyer: led him to the temple; positioned him under the stairway. Now Hunter listened into the system, flicking on each switch in turn. Nothing much. The rustle of curtains on one speaker. Which room he wouldn't know.

On the sixth one he heard something. A whisper, a brief shuffle, nothing more. But which room did it come from?

It was time to fight the old man on his own terms.

Hunter shut his eyes. Blacked out everything. Now they were equal. For both it would be darkness. Only youth on Hunter's side.

In his darkness, Hunter searched for a clue. It came to him: a smell. Part incense, part cigars, part the moldiness of age. But unique. He homed in on it like a tracker dog.

The scent led him out of the study, along the southern side of the building. Hunter marveled at his own powers.

It took him past the carved figurines on the staircase, past the bloodstain on the entrance floor, and into the room at the front of the house.

The smell of the old man there was strongest.

Hunter now opened his eyes. It was a big room, occupying one wing of the house and running off into darkness at the farthest corners.

In it were easy chairs, chaise lounges, and carved occasional tables. Against one wall Hunter could see the metal glint of sports trophies on display along with a collection of the old man's archery bows.

Tense and perspiring, Hunter stood in the center of the room. The old man's smell was strong.

Suddenly a car swept up the curve of the driveway. White light-beams swung in an arc through the room as it rounded the front of the building.

Caught in their spotlight was C. C. Hau.

His body poised in an archer's stance; the bow stretched and steady as a rock. His granddaughter alongside him clutching the folds of his silk dressing gown.

Even more amazing—the old man's eyes were wide open.

Hunter swung the gun toward C. C. Hau, but the car was moving and suddenly it was the old man's turn to have Hunter's silhouette nailed against the light.

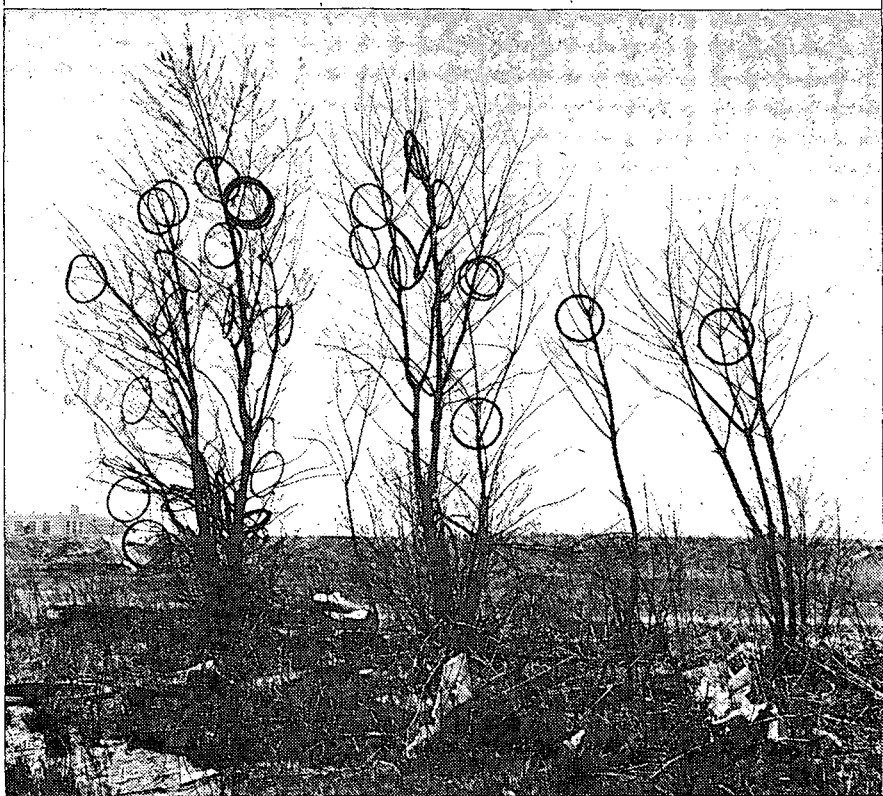
His arrow thumped into Hunter's chest, smashed through his ribs, and buried itself up to its red feather in his heart.

Hunter fell, knees first, wide-eyed, to the floor.

C. C. Hau's daughter rushed through the open front door and swept her daughter up. Together they clung to her father. Then carefully she reached up and pulled off the Band-aids the old man had used to hold up his eyelids.

They fell shut. The dark had never felt so safe.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



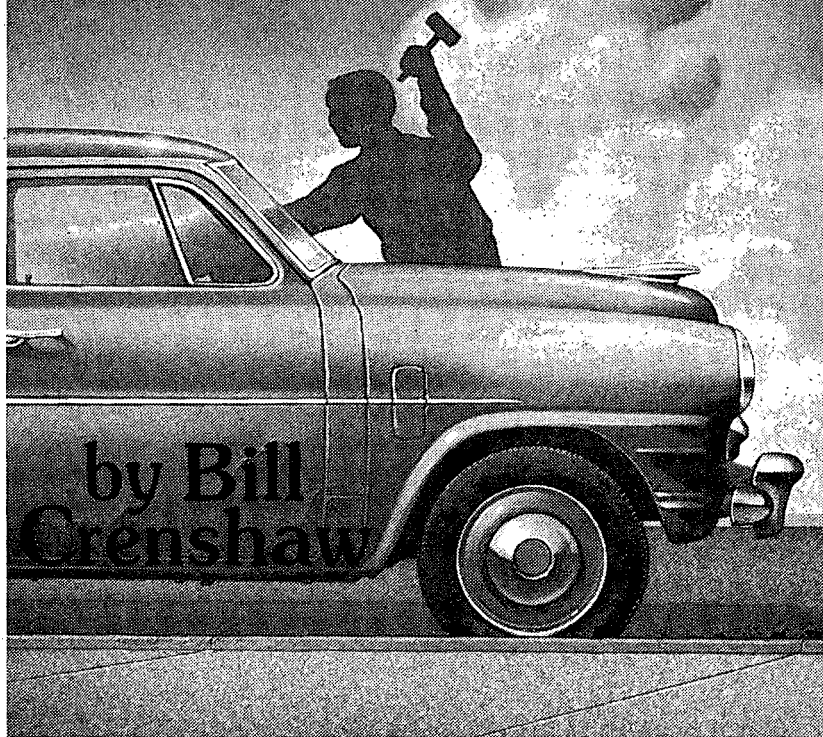
C. N. Jay-Jaffee

The Ghost Riders Convention? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the September Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

Veni, Vidi, Video



Fowler W. Nations leaned forward in his chair, challenging the video camera. Adam adjusted the focus. In the viewfinder, Nations' tufts of white hair burned with

unexpected brilliance. Every day-old whisker was sharply defined.

"And to my nephew," Nations continued, "Alexander Scott, who has visited so often

these last few months, who has been so concerned about my well-being, and so anxious to take me out to a ball game, believing, for some reason, that peanuts and Cracker Jacks and the August sun would be beneficial to my health, to you, Alex—" he paused "—I leave my souvenir program from the 1961 World Series." And again the cackle and the dentures appearing and the eyes disappearing.

Adam's ears rang. He cut the headset volume and straightened. His back hurt. No matter how he swiveled the camcorder eyepiece, he was uncomfortable. To his right, Fat Chance filled an antique chair, looming over the small color monitor angling up from the floor. Fat Chance raised his head. Adam rubbed his back, hoping Fat Chance would take the hint and offer to trade places. Fat Chance looked back down at the monitor.

Nations' spasm of laughter was ending. Adam turned up the volume and bent to the eyepiece. Slightly out of focus and diminished by distance, sitting in the viewfinder above Nations' right shoulder like a toad whispering at the ear, was Marion Reid, attorney, present in the frame for legal reasons as Nations read his new will to the friends and relatives who would one day, in the not too distant

future, gather in futile hope around the television in Reid's office.

"And to my dear sister Mildred, who, out of the kindness of her heart, has moved into my house and has eaten at my table and drunk at my bar these last months, to you, Mildred, who have so often said that you never want to leave me, I leave you the burial plot next to mine, and a lawn chair, so that until that time when you lie beside me forever, you may sit beside me and be comforted." He twisted his head toward the closed door. "Are you listening at the keyhole, Mildred?" he shouted.

The shout caught Adam off guard. He tore the earphones off and handed them to Fat Chance, who whispered that with the automatic level control you didn't need the earphones on anyway.

Adam dug his knuckles into the small of his back. What in the name of all things decent, he asked himself again, was he doing here, recording the meanness of a sick rich old man taking his petty and posthumous revenge on friends and relatives for their slights or for their grasping attentions.

More to the point, what was he doing here with Fat Chance, "here" not meaning the five hundred square feet of Nations' bedroom in particular, but more

generally meaning . . . His thoughts shied away from the facts again: he had gone into business with Fat Chance. He was a partner. He tried to remember how Fat Chance had convinced him.

"And to sweet little Susie Snyder," Nations continued, "who has provided me with *real* comfort these last few years, who may have shortened my time but made my time worth it, who knew exactly what she was doing and why she was doing it, and who did it without the little fictions of any concern other than self-concern, of any interest other than self-interest, to sweet little Sue, who has so much of her pneumatic life before her, to you, Sue, I leave my holdings in IBM." He raised a withered hand and blew a kiss to the camera. "Rest, occasionally, in peace, Susie dear."

Adam leaned toward Fat Chance and checked the monitor. In the background, he could see that the lawyer remained unmoved, his face legally impassive, staring through the northern-facing french windows, looking unreal in that natural light since the color was adjusted for the key and fill lights blazing on Nations from either side of the camcorder. If his client's antics or morality or ethics upset him, he didn't show it. He didn't care what Nations did. He'd get his money.

Money, of course. That was why Adam had thrown in with Fat Chance. Money. Spectre haunting these his later years. The twins had just turned three. In fifteen years, college costs would be, would be . . . And in the meantime he was driving a twenty-one-year-old VW bug that wasn't exactly a family car, and a forty-year-old Studebaker, Brunhilde, who, no matter how much he loved her, could be patched together with old parts only so many times, and whose patchings, as donors returned rust to rust, were becoming increasingly scarce and expensive. And then there were groceries and insurance and clothes and *shoes*, for crying out loud, how had little bitty shoes for toddlers gotten to be thirty dollars a pair on sale? And doctors' bills and utilities and . . .

" . . . the rest of my blue chip holdings, I give one hundred shares to the following people." Nations pulled from beside him and held up to the camcorder the phone book. He began flipping through at random. "To Thomas Haus of 307 Brockman Avenue. To Ross Mullinex of 106 Gordon Street. To Vanessa Whitworth of 109 Twin Lake Road. To Arthur . . ."

The lawyer sat up. Fat Chance made a low strangling noise, shaking his head as if it were too heavy and he were trying to get it balanced. Adam fought

the urge to start a slow zoom in on Nations to reveal his essential ugliness, face bloating to fill the frame completely. When the twins graduated from college, Adam would be almost Nations' age. The thought that he might end this way, sour and shriveled, an old lemon, overwhelmed him with panic. In the viewfinder, the lawyer was fidgeting, and as Nations rattled on, spit gathering at the corners of his mouth as he continued the roll call of random beneficiaries, Adam caught himself listening for his own name.

Fat Chance pushed himself back out of Brunhilde's vast trunk and held out his hand. Adam gave him the orange extension cords.

"No, no, the tripod next. Last In, First Out, Last In, First Out."

"I said," said Adam, "I quit."

Fat Chance's right hand remained extended. Into it Adam put the handle of the tripod's carrying case. Fat Chance leaned into the trunk and made some adjustments, straightened, held out his hand. "Next."

Adam waited. Fat Chance finally turned around. "So what's eating you?"

"You said from the first that if I wanted to leave, any time, I could, and you would buy me

out. That was the only reason I agreed in the first place."

Fat Chance pointed to the case that held the lights. "Look, you want to be director on the next shoot, say so. I don't mind."

"It's not that," said Adam, handing him the lights.

"So what is it?" said Fat Chance, his voice muffled as he bent into the trunk. Adam remained silent, refusing to talk to Fat Chance's back. Fat Chance rose and turned and pointed to the light stands. "So what is it, then?"

Adam shrugged. "It's not what I expected."

"Oh, lord, don't give me 'expected.' When it's not what you expected, I don't know what you mean."

What indeed? Two months before, Adam hadn't even owned a VCR. Now he was making videos. An easy way to a little extra money. All you needed was a camcorder and a cassette. But then things got complicated.

All this equipment crammed into Brunhilde's trunk. All the time putting it into Brunhilde in the morning, taking it out again at night, and, for every shoot in between, taking it out and setting it up and knocking it down and loading it up. All the time planning the shoot, doing call sheets and shot sheets and edit sheets, making phone calls, writing want ads, dupli-

cating tapes, doing the books. And the fall semester was starting soon, which meant more work on weekends, which meant more weekends lost, which made you wonder what was the point of having a family if you had to spend all your time away from the family to provide for the family? And it wasn't as if the money was exactly flowing, and what did trickle in had to be used to wear away the rock of the credit card balances and credit union loans that had paid for all this equipment crammed into Brunhilde . . .

Adam gestured vaguely, "It's just not what I expected, that's all."

Fat Chance pointed to the extension cords and the gaffer's tape. "Look, you did good up there. You're good at the interface. Hand me that other roll of tape."

"Interface?"

"Between us and all those people with more moola and less imagination, which is why you can't quit, since we got the opposite problem. I tell ya, Adam, we're a team. Brains and balls. You deal with the upper crust, I deal with what's under it. You got the suave, I got the hustle. You got the couth, I got the clout. And Ginger's got the technical stuff, and class just oozes out of her. We're onto something here, Dr. Clay. Stick with it."

Adam stood for a moment, thinking.

"We just earned five hundred smacks."

Adam was surprised. "He won't pay that much."

"We deal with the lawyer. It's in his interest to keep expenses high. When you got a cow, get butter."

Five hundred dollars would pay for the tripod and the lights and part of a light stand. At that rate . . . But then he remembered. "There are taxes," said Adam, "and gas; and interest. And insurance. And advertising and phone calls. And stationery. And . . ."

Fat Chance shrugged. "Faint heart never won squat. Got to stay the course." He laid the camcorder case gently in the place reserved for it in the center of all the other equipment, wrapped and padded in an old blanket. He surveyed the packed trunk briefly and slammed the lid. "What say we grab a bite before the next shoot?"

Adam frowned.

"Look," Fat Chance said, "the next shoots are easy. We got an inventory and a real estate. Things instead of people. You handle that okay?"

"Not a real estate," Adam muttered.

"And a wedding tomorrow. Society wedding. Pays big."

Adam felt himself weakening. Then his eye fell on the

plastic sign stuck by magnets to the side of Brunhilde. *Stars*R*Us*; it said. *Let Us Put "U" In The Picture*. Fat Chance's ideas. Adam found them objectionable on several levels. He wasn't even sure the name was legal. And worst of all, below the slogan, Adam's home phone number, though mercifully not his name. He reached out and plucked the sign off and handed it to Fat Chance. "I'm sorry, Marvyn, but this just isn't for me. I would like for you to buy me out, please, as we agreed."

Fat Chance looked somewhere off into the sky. "Can't."

"What do you mean, can't?"

"I mean no way; impossible, no jack, unmucho denairo. I don't have the money. I don't have any money."

Adam felt his lips tighten. "Borrow it."

"I'm at the limit. I'm beyond. I got no cash, Adam, and if you bail out of our little enterprise here, it's going to be twice as hard for me to make any and four times as hard to buy you out. So if you really want out, you got to stay in."

Fat Chance took the sign from Adam and stuck it back on the driver's door. "Where you want to eat?" he said.

room, raising her hands, palms up, as they entered, as if offering it to them. "Kendrick keeps saying, 'One day I need to get all of this inventoried.' But he never will, you know how men are."

"Yes, ma'am," said Fat Chance. "We sure do." He scribbled on his clipboard. "And Mr. Gillis will be home . . . ?"

"Tomorrow night, late, I think. Around ten or eleven."

Adam's heart sank. An easy shoot, Fat Chance had said. No elaborate setups, no light stands or extension cords or gaffer's tape, no mikes or wires or sound checks. Just the camcorder and the camcorder-mounted light and a fresh battery. And ten tapes, thought Adam. Mrs. Gillis wanted everything recorded, and she meant everything.

"What with the crime rate and drugs, isn't it awful?" she said. "I mean, we're members of Community Watch and all, which is kind of silly, isn't it, since we can't really see each other's houses in Greenwood Hills, but I suppose we might notice strangers in the neighborhood or something, I don't know. Marge won't even join, she thinks that if somebody wants something, they'll get it and you might as well not bother trying to stop them, just stick it to the insurance companies because that's what they're there for."

"It's a birthday surprise, you see," said Mrs. Gillis, leading them into the dining

Adam saw Fat Chance go pale, cheeks quivering, sweat beading forehead. He recognized the signs of internal struggle as Fat Chance's need to correct Mrs. Gillis's understanding of the purpose of insurance companies wrestled with Fat Chance's desire for this inventory shoot. Adam had heard the lecture himself too often. Don't, he thought.

"Well," said Fat Chance, faltering a little, "well, now, ma'am, you should understand that your insurance companies are an important . . ."

"Still," she continued, oblivious to Fat Chance, "it's better to be safe than sorry, don't you think?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am," said Fat Chance emphatically.

Adam breathed a relieved sigh.

They were in the den now. Mrs. Gillis waved a hand at the entertainment center filling one wall. "You're welcome to use our camera if you like."

She'd sooner die, Adam thought.

"Thanks, ma'am," said Fat Chance, "but we'd better use our own equipment. More familiar with it, you know. We'll go get it now, if that's all right."

"Just let yourself back in," she said, dismissing them.

"This may take longer than we thought," said Fat Chance once they were outside. "We'll

have to come back tomorrow."

"And tomorrow and tomorrow," said Adam. "They've got their own camera. Why don't they do it themselves? What does she do all day?"

"She stays thin," said Fat Chance, hefting the camcorder case. "Full-time job. Grab the camlight and a spare battery and a couple of tapes."

"Why don't we tell her that it's more than we can do now?"

"Because that's Mrs. Kendrick Gillis, that's why, and Mr. Kendrick Gillis is big in the Chamber and could throw a lot of names our way. Contacts, Adam. Word of mouths. That's how we build this thing up. And speaking of mouths, I seem to be doing all the talking. I could use some help in there."

"I wouldn't worry," said Adam. "I think you're interfacing quite well."

They decided to take turns, one shooting while the other took notes. Mrs. Gillis accompanied them and described each valuable for the tape, including its price, its history, and why it was of course irreplaceable. In the dining room, they shot silver flatware and Jefferson cups and candelabra and punch bowls and platters. They shot crystal goblets and Limoges china. They shot the dining room suite.

"I really don't think you need to worry about anybody taking

your furniture, ma'am," said Fat Chance as Adam turned the camcorder light to the dark and brilliant depths of the dining room table.

"Marge has a friend," said Mrs. Gillis, "who has a friend who knew somebody whose sister was away just for a week-end, and a moving van came and cleaned them out, every stick. Isn't that just too awful? They even took the mantelpiece." She bit her lower lip in a seductively thoughtful way. "I guess you'd better shoot the mantelpiece."

They shot the mantelpiece, and the clock on the mantelpiece, and the paintings on the walls and the rug on the floor and the tables on the rug and the lamps on the tables and the couches and chairs lit so tastefully by the lamps. They shot Mrs. Gillis's jewelry box and all its contents spread out on the king-sized, waveless, heated waterbed with the bookcase headboard filled with condensed books and the built-in stereo and home security system command center. They shot Mr. Gillis's collection of gold cufflinks. They shot fur coats and silk shirts and fifty pairs of shoes. They shot the small electronics store crammed into the den; they shot the computers and printers and modems and fax machines and ergonomic furniture in the

study; they shot pottery and baskets and masks and crude statuettes in the library, and books there, too, though not as many as the name of the room implied. They shot the cars in the garage. They shot the tape-decks in the cars. Then they said they'd have to come back tomorrow.

"It's just down the street and we're going to be late," Adam muttered as they pulled out of the driveway.

"We'll make it," said Fat Chance.

They were late. The agent wasn't happy. He had things to do, too, you know. It cost him money to stand around like this. Baker Street Development was looking for a taping company to put under contract, he said. Maybe they should look a little more.

"Well," said Fat Chance, almost casually, as if it didn't matter where Baker Street took its business, "like I said, we're sorry, but we committed to a project for Mr. Gillis, and when we commit, we commit."

"Kendrick Gillis?" said the agent.

"Just around the curve there," said Fat Chance pointing a thumb over his shoulder.

"Well," said the agent, his eyes flickering to Adam, "we like people who make commitments we can count on."

"We are committed," said Fat

Chance, "to all of our clients."

The agent looked at his watch. "Okay, here's the key to the lockbox. Make sure, make double damn sure, that the house is tight when you leave."

Fat Chance shrugged. "S.O.P.," he said.

When the agent drove off, Fat Chance took off his sports coat and put on his baseball hat and mirror shades. "Okay, Adam," he said, looking over his clipboard while Adam settled the camcorder onto his shoulder, "let's get an establishing shot about thirty degrees off center so we get the house at an angle with those trees in the foreground, then a slow zoom to the entrance, and make sure you get that stonework. No, we'll start with a slow pan to the establishing shot, then slow zoom. Give the establishing shot about three, four seconds. And don't pan right to left. People get queasy." He looked up at the sky. "Let's pick this up, Adam."

The light was going. It was beginning to mist. Fat Chance opened an umbrella and held it over the camcorder and partially over Adam. Adam's head, as well as his back, was hurting now, and his legs were tired and the camera a bit unsteady, and as he panned from the street toward the house, he could see in the viewfinder that they had aroused the interest of a pack of neighborhood dogs.

It was obvious from the image that the camcorder had not been damaged. Adam saw no reason to rerun the tape. Fat Chance punched "Play" anyway.

On the screen the camera panned slowly from the street toward a house, past pines with pine straw mounded attractively at their bases, past azaleas of a deep, well-watered August green, past six or eight dogs who, just as they were about to pass out of frame, started moving forward, past... The camera swish-panned back to the dogs and now their barking could be heard, and the camera, obviously hand-held, started pulling back, slowly at first, then in some haste, the dogs running now, then the camera swished again and on the screen, in the jumping and jerking and tilting, one could occasionally make out the back of a large man with a baseball cap and an umbrella running toward a car, followed closely, apparently, by the man with the camera. Then there was a swirl and a shot of sky, of the ground, then low angle shots of dogs closing in with great loping strides, then a blur as the cameraman leaped to his feet, and a jerk, and the slam of a car door, and closeups of the teeth and tongues of dogs, their barking loud even through the closed window of the car.

"The instincts of a great cameraman," said Ginger, laughing still. "You kept rolling. My dear, you missed your calling."

"Funny daddy," said the twins.

Fat Chance couldn't speak. Tears streamed down his face.

Adam looked as if he were smiling. From the distance came another subterranean rumble of thunder.

It had stopped raining by the time they returned to Greenwood Hills the next morning. They finished up the exteriors on the real estate shoot in the early light, before the dogs had waked their owners and been let out for their morning death patrols. Fat Chance promised to charge Baker Street a little extra for the flattering near-dawn sunlight. Adam yawned and nodded.

They drove back to the strip for an egg-on-hamburger-bun and a cup of acidic coffee, then back to the Gillis shoot. Adam couldn't stop yawning, and he felt a vague guilt to be working on Sunday morning, and because he was working, guilt that he wasn't in church, especially knowing that they were going to shoot the wedding in that very church that very afternoon. If, he thought, we ever get through here.

"Did we do the attic yet?" Mrs. Gillis asked brightly as

Adam slid a fresh cassette into the camcorder.

Finally she ran out of things to show them, and Fat Chance thanked her profusely for the opportunity to help protect her valuables and promised that her copy of the tapes would be delivered by the end of the week, and that two separate sets of copies would, for security, be placed in the Stars*R*Us storage facilities, meaning one at Adam's house, one at his. He left her their card and encouraged her to tell her friends and neighbors about their services.

They had time for a quick lunch before they had to start setting up for the wedding. "I love weddings," said Fat Chance. "All those proud papas and weeping mamas and jealous little bride maids dying to be in white. Sells lots of tapes."

Adam hated weddings. They meant renting an extra camcorder, which wouldn't fit into Brunhilde's crammed trunk and had to be hidden under a towel behind the driver's seat. They took too long to set up and were complicated to shoot. They meant long sessions of editing and switching to get the final tape. And they meant that Fat Chance thought he was John Huston or Howard Hawks or Busby Berkeley, and that Adam was the crew.

There was a wireless mike on the altar in front of the minis-

ter. In Adam's right ear was the earphone from the wireless mike link on the camcorder; on his left the headset through which Fat Chance gave instructions. A tiny mike angled down in front of his mouth; an antenna rose from his headset. He felt silly.

Adam's camcorder was mounted in the balcony for the high angles, the long shots of church and ceremony, and shots of the guests when they rose and turned to the bride walking up the aisle. "Get a face, sell a tape," Fat Chance always said.

Fat Chance got faces with the rented camera at the front of the church, and eye-level shots of the bride, and mood shots of light streaming through stained glass, and candle flames that filled the frame and went out of focus into a two-shot of the bride and groom at the altar. He did closeups of bridesmaids and best men, of parents and uncles and aunts, of veils and bouquets, of rings slipping onto fingers and garters off of legs. Adam zoomed in for closeups, too, especially profiles of the loving couple staring deep into each other's eyes, which they tended to do rather dramatically, knowing that tape was rolling.

But today the bride was not cooperating. "Get that shot yet?" came Fat Chance's voice in Adam's ear.

"She won't turn around," Adam whispered. "What's she doing down there?"

"Crying. Looking down and crying. I got her from this angle, but we need the double profile. They always want the double profile."

"When she says 'I do,'" said Adam. "She has to look up then."

"Right," said Fat Chance. "Be ready."

Adam pulled back for a medium shot until he heard in his right ear, "Do you, Angie Mae, take Walter . . ." and he started a slow zoom, hoping to catch the bride's first tentative glance as she turned to face her beloved. Slowly she turned. In Adam's head the sound of her hand across her beloved's face was like a gunshot.

"I heard about last night, you bastard," Angie Mae said. "And with my so-called maid of honor." And she grabbed the maid of honor's dress at the throat and pulled, and the sound of splitting fabric reached Adam even without the earphone, which he had already jerked free of his right ear.

"Keep rolling," whispered Fat Chance in his left.

Adam kept rolling and realized, as the bride stormed down the aisle and heads swiveled and voices began low like murmurs of distant seas, that he was actually looking forward to

Monday, when Fat Chance would go back to selling insurance and Adam, with only a week left before the semester, could turn his attention to Anglo-Saxon, to syllabi, to the dread of freshman papers. Ah, he thought, the academic life.

In the viewfinder, the groom turned to the maid of honor, palms open, and she uncrossed her arms long enough to slap his other cheek.

This has to stop, Adam thought, sitting on the edge of the bed, Monday stretching before him like a desert. He had been so tired the night before that he hadn't bothered to unload the trunk, and sleep hadn't made him feel any better. And today he had to return the rented camcorder, buy a dozen blank tapes, and duplicate the will tape and the inventory and even the wedding, because emotion was emotion, Fat Chance insisted, and people might buy the tape because they were mad, and anyway, a contract was a contract and it wasn't their fault if the groom couldn't keep his pants on.

He was just going to have to tell Fat Chance no and stick to it; and if it meant taking a short-term financial loss, well—well, he'd just have to take it. Maybe it would goad him back to the word processor and the

romance novel that he'd not been able to bring himself to work on in over a year, considering it, in his heart, indecent.

He slapped his hands on his knees and stood up. It was decided, then. He'd shot his last inch of tape for Stars*R*Us. He felt a weight lift.

But, showered, shaved, dressed, cup of hot tea at hand, feeling almost optimistic, he got other news.

"Marvyn called," said Ginger, pushing a scrap of paper across the table. "You have a ten thirty at that address, lawyer, wants you to shoot a deposition from a witness in the hospital. Business is picking up." She smiled.

Adam tried to smile back.

Standing in line at Vid City, trying to balance a dozen videotapes, Adam knew he should have returned the camcorder first. He had thought to zip in and out of Vid City and drop off the camcorder at Randy's Rent-All on the way to the appointment, but Vid City was having its biweekly semi-annual pre-inventory closeout sale, and lines were long and customers were testy and clerks were slow and error-prone. A neon clock over the checkout counter crept past ten o'clock and started dropping toward ten thirty, and Adam's main concern became handing his credit card to the clerk. He imagined her dialing

to check the card, looking up and saying, "Just a moment, sir," imagined lights flashing and sirens wailing and strong hands on his arms and a deep voice behind him saying, "You're over your limit, buster."

"Thank you for shopping Vid City," said the clerk, pushing across the counter the credit card and the tapes in two plastic Vid City bags. She sounded mechanical, as if she were a computer-generated image. "Thank you," said Adam, but her eyes were already focused on the customer behind him:

He looked at his watch. He could make the appointment if he could find a parking place.

And he not only found one, it was shaded and had time left on the meter, the kind of luck that restores faith in an essential order in the universe and enabled Adam to meet Fat Chance's growl of "Where've you been?" with a calmness approaching the serene, and a determination to resign, once and for all, right after the appointment. He'd help tie up his loose ends, but that, he'd say, was it. He could do it, he told himself. Courage, he said.

Mr. Horace Vernon, attorney-at-law, was young and full-faced and fighting a receding hairline by letting the hair on the left side grow long, parting it just above the ear, and sculpting it into a sort of disk that sat

as if surprised on the top of his head. He tilted back in his chair and put his fingertips together and quizzed them on their experience. Fat Chance did the interfacing, appropriately deferential. Adam felt pleasantly detached, knowing that this would be his last shoot, if they got it, which didn't matter much to him one way or the other.

"And you've been in business how long?" Vernon asked.

"Lots of experience, wouldn't you say, Adam?" said Fat Chance. "And our editor used to be in TV news, a real pro."

"We did our first shoot about six weeks ago," said Adam.

"A deposition?" asked Vernon.

Fat Chance smiled and cleared his throat. "Our legal work has been primarily with wills."

"A birthday party," said Adam. "Our first shoot was Master Winston Doyle's fifth birthday party."

"Councilman Doyle's son," Fat Chance added quickly. "You know Councilman Doyle?"

Vernon was looking incredulous.

"Have you done a deposition?" Vernon asked.

"Wills, depositions, pretty much the same kind of setup, you know?" said Fat Chance.

Vernon glanced at Adam.

Adam looked out the window, feeling independent, liberated.

Maybe he would help Fat Chance by duplicating tapes; maybe Ginger would still do some editing, if she wanted. But no more toadying to potential employers, no more tugging at forelocks. Money was just not that important.

In the elevator, Fat Chance was steaming. "Big help there, Adam. You impressed him all to hell. And why'd you mention the birthday party?"

"You might get the job," said Adam.

"He said he'd be in touch. Don't call us, we'll call you. This is show biz, Adam. Image. We live and die by the image." He squinted at Adam. The elevator doors opened, and Adam started across the lobby. "What do you mean 'you'?" said Fat Chance.

Adam kept walking with the flow of those around him.

"Great," called Fat Chance. "Just great. Leave me in the lurch, will ya, Adam? Fine."

Adam stood for a second, apparently smiling, while people poured by in both directions. Then he started for the doors. Fat Chance caught up with him.

"You're not helping the company image a whole lot anyway," Fat Chance said. "We don't need you. When we go public, maybe I'll let you buy a few shares."

Adam stopped on the pave-

ment, spotted Brunhilde up the street, started walking again. "Listen, Marvyn, maybe Ginger and I can do some of the technical and duplicating work..."

"Just give me a ride back to the office."

"Where's your car?"

"I took a cab, okay? Image. Success breeds success. I show up in a cab, hey, I must be doing okay, not fighting for a parking place. That make sense to you?"

It didn't, but Adam didn't say so. He knew how sensitive Fat Chance was about Ruth's walking out again. This time she had taken the new car and left Fat Chance the clunker. Adam didn't dare even allude to Ruth.

"We'll have to drop off the camcorder first."

Fat Chance rolled his eyes. "Jeez, you haven't done that yet? We'll get charged an extra day."

"Look, Marvyn, I had to buy the tapes. I couldn't buy the tapes and return the camcorder and make the appointment, okay?" They had reached the car, and Adam was unlocking the passenger door. "So get in and be quiet," Adam said, as close to losing his temper as he ever got. He turned to walk to the driver's side.

"What's all this glass?" said Fat Chance.

"What glass?" said Adam, stopping.

"All over the front seat. And look at your glovebox. What was your glovebox."

Fat Chance stood aside so Adam could see. The driver's window had been smashed in. The glovebox had been prised open. The bags of tapes were gone. "Where's the camcorder?" said Fat Chance.

Adam leaned over the front seat and looked in the back. Except for the white towel, the back was empty.

Adam picked curving triangles of glass delicately from the driver's seat.

"Cops are on their way," said Fat Chance, returning from the pay phone. "Don't touch anything, for crying out loud. Don't mess up anything else."

"What does that mean?" said Adam, straightening.

"Well, look, Einstein, you don't leave camcorders lying out in the open."

"It was this," said Adam, pulling the sign off the door and flapping it in Fat Chance's face. It made a blooming sound. "Here's the invitation. 'Video equipment in car,' it says. The camcorder was hidden. It was this stupid sign."

"Hey, take it easy, will ya?" said Fat Chance, gesturing as if he was trying to push Adam's fury down.

Adam put his hand to his tie

and glanced around. People on the sidewalk were watching him sidelong, giving him an extra foot or two of pavement as they passed. Adam cleared his throat. "How much was it worth?"

"Who knows?" said Fat Chance. "But it'll cost us fifteen hundred easy."

Adam blanched: "What about insurance?"

"Have to check your policy."

"Marvyn, dammit, you *wrote* the policy."

Fat Chance's eyes widened. Never had he heard Adam swear. "Yeah, well, we just got to check it, that's all. I think you got a pretty high deductible, five hundred maybe. Maybe more. Same with this." He gestured at the window and glovebox.

"Meaning I pay the first five hundred."

Fat Chance smiled and raised his shoulders. "Insurance is a gamble."

Adam started to note that the words "insurance" and "gamble" implied opposite things, but it was pointless. "Well," he said, "I just won't get it fixed, that's all. I don't have air conditioning anyway." He waited, for what he wasn't sure. Agreement from Fat Chance perhaps. Nothing came. "I'm going to call Ginger," he said.

"I'll watch the car," said Fat Chance.

"Too late," Adam muttered as he turned away.

Ginger arrived before the police did. "Of course we'll fix the window," she said. "We can't drive around with the window like that."

"We can't afford it now," said Adam, determined to be firm.

Ginger stared a second. "You just don't want to face Earl, that's all."

"That's not all," said Adam, but in truth he didn't want to face Earl, for whom Brunhilde was a child that Adam had married and treated poorly. Each time Brunhilde was nicked or scratched or dented, Earl wept. Adam found it disturbing. It wasn't that he feared actual bodily harm from Earl. Still.

The police finally arrived, and a witness from the travel agency across the street. He had seen a car pull up, he said, and the passenger jump out, white male, reddish hair, sunglasses. He popped through Brunhilde's window with a flat pry-bar kind of thing. He was in the car ten, fifteen seconds. He took some bags and what looked like a camcorder and jumped back in his car. The whole thing had taken less than twenty-five or thirty seconds. Hadn't even tied up traffic.

"Did you get a look at the driver?" asked the policeman with the notebook.

The witness shrugged. "Male. White. That's about it."

"What about the car?"

"The tag was covered with mud or dirt or something. The car was kind of cream colored. Four door. Like that one." He pointed to a passing car. "Or that one over there. Or that one."

The police offered Adam cold comfort. "Smooth," the one with the notebook said. "If you weren't looking right at them, you wouldn't even see it happen. Pros, not kids. Addicts, maybe, but probably not. Don't think we'll get anything back."

Adam nodded glumly.

"Oh, and get that window fixed quick. Hate to see you get a ticket on top of everything else."

Earl's Unusual Auto Repairs was a cinder block shop in the middle of an auto graveyard, a field of car bodies in neat rows, rusting away and donating the occasional part to still-running cars in need. Earl's special love was Studebakers. He kept what he called his previously-driveable Studebakers covered with tarps. When he saw Brunhilde, his eyes filled and ran over. He yelled incoherently at Adam while Ginger, Fat Chance, and the twins hid in the VW.

"I think he said he'd do what he could," said Adam, wedged in the back between the twins in their safety seats.

"Anybody hungry?" asked Fat Chance, fishing for an invitation.

"Are you buying lunch?" said Ginger, pulling into traffic.

"Well, that's not . . ."

"It's so considerate," Ginger continued, "especially since it's been such a terrible morning. Really very nice of you, Marvin."

"Well . . ."

"Where would you like to go? Pizza House? Western Steak?"

"Pizza," said the twins. "Pizza, pizza."

"Pizza it is, then," said Ginger. "Say thank you to Uncle M&M, girls."

"Thank you, Uncle M&M."

"You're welcome," Fat Chance growled.

They had a little pizza party, and everybody felt better, although Adam suspected that Fat Chance's change to cheeriness came when he realized that he could charge the meal to Stars*R*Us. That was okay with Adam, since he intended to charge the repairs on Brunhilde to Stars*R*Us and, as Chaucer advised, make virtue of necessity. Which reminded him of all the things he hadn't done yet to prepare for the semester that was rolling down on him like a juggernaut. Which made him anxious to finish eating and get home and *do* something.

They dropped Fat Chance at

his office for what was left of the day, and Adam gratefully took the passenger seat, glad for the breathing room. He was comfortably full, belt tight across his belly. The sun was warm. The semester seemed far away. He settled back in his seat. Life was short. You shouldn't let things get to you. He might take a little nap when they got home.

When they got home, they found the front door jimmied. They called the police from a neighbor's in case the intruder were still inside, but the police found no one. The den was stripped of everything except books. All of the video equipment was gone.

Adam heard a car door slam and saw Fat Chance getting out of a cab. The police car still sat in the driveway. Fat Chance studied it as he walked toward the house.

It was the cab that made Adam angry. He felt naked and vulnerable. Somehow the cab seemed to say that Fat Chance was just popping over to see what all the fuss was, after which he would pop back.

Fat Chance opened the door, looking at the chewed and splintered wood around the lock.

"I told you it was that stupid sign," said Adam. "I knew we shouldn't have had that stupid

sign on the car." Adam realized he was yelling. He lowered his voice. "Ask Sergeant Orr."

The uniformed police officer looked up from his notebook. "Probably the sign led them to the car and they got an address from the glovebox."

"Maybe," said Fat Chance.

The policeman shrugged. "Everything's maybe."

Fat Chance turned to Adam. "Neighborhood kids, maybe."

"They came for the video stuff," said Adam, waving a hand at the almost empty shelves. Most of the books had been crowded into boxes when Stars*R*Us needed space. "They took it all."

"Everything?"

"Even the tapes."

Fat Chance stood with eyes narrowed, looking beyond Adam into the den. "Well," he said finally, "we can replace the equipment by this time tomorrow and be back in business by . . ."

Adam was shaking his head.

"Okay, what?" said Fat Chance.

"I'm not going through this again."

"Hey, Adam, a crime happens every seventeen and a half seconds in this country. Am I right, sergeant?"

"You got me," Sergeant Orr said, not looking up.

"Issuing invitations to thieves

and muggers to break into my house," Adam muttered. "I told you that we shouldn't put a sign on Brunhilde. I said . . ."

"Hey, don't blame me," said Fat Chance, cutting him off. "Even if there is a connection between the car and this, which we don't know if there is, remember, even then it's not *my* fault they broke in here."

"Well, it most certainly is not *my* fault," Adam snapped. The policeman raised his eyes from his notes. "I didn't want to get involved with all this video business anyway."

"Yeah, well, who made you, huh? Who held you down with a gun to your head and said, 'Hey, Clay, invest in Stars*R*Us or else'? Not me. Not my fault."

"*Nobody's* fault," said Ginger through clenched teeth as she entered the room. "None of this is *anybody's* fault." She shook her head. "I wish I had this on videotape. You must excuse them, Sergeant Orr. Usually they have their little spats in private."

Orr shrugged. "Always a stress, being broken into. Helps if you feel like you can regain control. Like an inventory. You don't have one of those video inventories of what was taken, do you? Helps I.D. the stuff quicker."

Ginger looked to Adam. Adam shook his head, the irony not lost on him, the curse of his life,

he thought, that no irony was ever lost on him.

Orr flipped his notebook closed. "Okay, we'll be in touch if anything breaks." Which, from his tone, didn't seem too likely.

Ginger thanked him for coming and walked him to the broken door.

"Oh, by the way," he added, turning to Adam and Fat Chance. "This is a residential neighborhood. It's not my area, but with your little business here, you may have a zoning problem."

"Oh, lord," said Adam, his hand over his eyes. "Oh, god."

Fat Chance had been charging his cab fares to Stars*R*Us.

"We can't afford that," said Ginger. "Adam will drive you home. Take your car to work."

"Look, sis, you gotta understand about image. If potential clients see me in that heap, they'll be laughing while they thumb back through the yellow pages. Hell, you were in TV. You know about image and all." He waited for a response. None came. He nodded and raised his hands, acknowledging defeat.

"Okay," said Ginger. "If you'll start processing those claims this afternoon, we'll wait until tomorrow, to discuss the future of Stars*R*Us." Adam thought

she shuddered a bit when she said the company name. Fat Chance opened his mouth to protest, but clamped it shut with a snap.

He opened it again in the VW bug as Adam drove him across town. "Not a question of image or cash flow. It's image *and* cash flow, see what I mean? I mean, one flows from the other, so to speak. Takes money to make money. Clothes make the man. You don't get a second chance at a first impression. See? Adam? You listening here?"

Adam wasn't. He was concentrating on the road, his fingers in a death grip on the steering wheel. He hated driving the bug in the best of circumstances, feeling the name "bug" to be all too appropriate, an entity small and insubstantial, liable to squashing. And these weren't the best of circumstances. He took another nervous glance into the rear view mirror. "We're being followed," he said.

"What are you talking, followed?" said Fat Chance in a tone that somehow mixed absolute incredulity with a kind of patient tolerance that drove Adam mad.

"Don't look," said Adam as Fat Chance started to turn.

"Then how'm I supposed to see?" said Fat Chance, his voice rising.

"It's a cream-colored car. Maybe the one who broke into Brunhilde."

Fat Chance grunted and turned the rear view mirror so he could see the car.

"Hey," shouted Adam. He pushed Fat Chance's hand away and twisted the mirror back. "Oh, lord, they're coming around us. It's a driveby."

"A driveby?"

"Duck, duck!" Adam was scrunching down while trying to keep his eyes on the road ahead, flinching away from the open window to his left. Peripherally he could see Fat Chance turn to look at the car pulling even with them, could see Fat Chance reach under his coat for something. He could hear the car coming up on the left.

BANG, Fat Chance shouted, leaning across Adam, arm extended. **BANG BANG BANG**.

Bangbangbangbang, came voices from the other car.

BANG, said Fat Chance.

The car pulled ahead of them. Adam saw four or five thumb-and-finger guns poking from the windows, saw four or five small faces smiling and shouting *bang*. It was a car full of children.

Fat Chance put his forefinger to Adam's temple. "Bang," he said, then started his hooting laughter. Adam felt as if he were getting too much oxygen. "Those kids should have been

buckled up," he muttered.

"Kids?" Fat Chance managed to say. "Midgets. Midget hit men. Hit midgets." And then he was off with the wolves again, baying and howling. Adam gritted his teeth and drove on.

The laughter didn't quite stop completely until Fat Chance saw the door to his house standing open, its lock smashed.

Even Fat Chance was discouraged. Stars**R**Us, it seemed, was fading fast.

All the equipment was gone, all the tapes were gone, some records were missing. They would even lose, they realized as they tried to make sense of it all over breakfast at Adam and Ginger's the next morning, they would even lose the week-end work, the wedding, the real estate, the inventory, the will. All that time and money down the drain, up in smoke, wasted and gone.

In a way, Adam thought, it was a relief. He had wanted out, and now he was out, like it or not. He decided to like it.

"What I don't get is, why'd they take the tapes?" Fat Chance flooded his waffles with syrup. "I mean, it's not like they're a hot item you can fence, and they must have lifted, what, sixty or seventy of them? Maybe a hundred?"

"We should have had better records," said Adam.

Fat Chance waved him aside. "That's a lot of bulk and not much value. I wouldn't've messed with them. I'd get the electronics, get out."

"Are you planning a break-in somewhere?" said Adam.

"What I don't understand," said Ginger, "is why they broke in here. I understand Brunhilde. Company car, camcorder in the back seat, smash and grab. But even if they got our address from the glovebox, this is a neighborhood, not a business district."

"So?" said Fat Chance.

"So you're not likely to find studio-quality equipment in somebody's house. If I had been looking for, say, a Grass Valley switcher, I'd be looking for a studio, not a den."

"So, maybe they weren't after studio stuff."

"What, then? Consumer-quality VCR's?"

Fat Chance stood, draining his coffee cup. "That's what they took. Who can figure?" He pursed his lips and frowned. "Another thing. Where'd they get my address?"

"The phone book," said Adam. They laughed.

Adam found it a positive pleasure to work on his freshman English syllabus. As grinding as teaching sometimes gets, as petty and repetitious and mind-numbing as academe could become, it took

only brief forays out into what the real world called the real world for Adam to appreciate the dull qualities of academe for the close and comfortable walls of a warm, dry cave. And there was so much to get done before the fall semester began, so many details to which he must attend, that he doubted he'd be able to spare much time, if any time at all, for Stars**R**Us. Too bad.

Ginger called. Brunhilde was ready.

"How was Earl?" he asked.

"Earl wouldn't talk to me," said Ginger. "I could hear him in the background telling Johnny what to say."

Adam felt his jaw clench.

Ginger said she could run him down to Earl's on her way to pick up the twins, or he could get Fat Chance to take him down after work.

"Let's get it over with," Adam said. Might as well face Earl now as later.

But Earl, to Adam's great relief, was at lunch.

"I never seen him this mad, Dr. Clay," said Johnny, wiping some sort of white goo on his grease-blackened hands. "He says you don't treat that car with respect."

"It was broken into," Adam protested. "I didn't do anything."

"He says there's a lot getting ready to go wrong with her and

that you treat her cruel. He says sometimes the best thing to do is to put the horse down. Sometimes he calls cars horses."

Adam took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Could I have the bill, please?" he said.

Earl was not undercharging him.

Adam took off his coat and loosened his tie as he drove back to the office. Despite the deadly August heat, he felt good. With Brunhilde repaired, the book on Stars*R*Us was closed. Things were as they had been. Oh, there were the insurance details to work out, but that was in Fat Chance's purview, not his; he had only to wait for the check, inadequate though it would be, and to accept his losses as the price one paid for knowledge. The ancient law of all the gods, that one should learn through suffering. Sitting at the red light, the sun hammering straight down, Adam wondered if suffering with no air conditioning qualified as a path of wisdom.

But with the heavy steel of Brunhilde wrapped around him and Stars*R*Us a dimming disaster, the lovely dullness of the normal reasserted itself, and Adam could look without trepidation at all the cream-colored sedans around him.

For a second he thought he was idling forward, but when

he stomped his brake he realized that he was motionless. The car in front was rolling back at him. He blew his horn. The car kept coming. He looked in the rear view mirror and could see only the huge grille of a van or a pickup boxing him in. He blew his horn and yelled and watched helplessly as the car rolled back and hit Brunhilde with enough force to lurch her into the bumper behind. Adam put his head down on the steering wheel. "I can't believe it," he said. "I can't believe it." The light changed.

Adam lifted his head. The car in front had its hood raised. There was a noise to his left. He turned and saw at his window a huge pewter belt buckle depicting an octagenarian Rebel soldier, bearded and bent, the Stars and Bars carried over his shoulder, a look of spry determination on his face. "Forget, Hell!" the buckle said. The face that owned the buckle leaned down, smiling, and pushed itself into the car.

"I'm okay," Adam assured him.

The face's words were low and cold in the August heat. "We want the tape. No cops. Keep it simple. You won't like it complicated. Yellow trash bag by the curb in front of your house. By midnight." The face backed out of the window and rose to its full height, still smil-

ing. "Okay," it said loud and friendly. "Thank you, sir. We'll be in touch."

Adam became aware that a horn was blowing. He looked in the mirror. The car was not the one that had been there before. He looked ahead. The car in front was gone.

Somehow he found first gear and pulled away.

"I'm telling you, that's what happened," said Adam.

Fat Chance eyed him warily. "We don't have any tapes. They've already got them. Why would they ask you for what they've already got?"

"We didn't exactly have a conversation. I didn't get a chance to interface."

"What did he look like?"

Adam could tell that Fat Chance was expecting him to make something up. What did he remember? A hairy arm. Sunlight on the thick red hair of a very hairy arm. Eyes hidden in the shadow of the brow. Sun on scalp beneath thinning hair. Smiling teeth. Carnivore.

"He had red hair," said Adam.

"He was big, strong. He was polite."

"What kind of car?"

"I don't know."

"What color?"

"Cream. Cream, what did you expect."

"Get the plate?"

Adam didn't answer.

Fat Chance looked distantly at the ceiling. "At some time," he began, as if talking to an unseen audience, "there comes a time when our reflexes slow down and we can't drive as well as . . ."

"Just shut up, Marvyn," said Ginger. "If Adam says it happened, it happened."

Fat Chance raised his eyebrows and shrugged, tolerating her indulgence. "Earl's going to love this," he added, a little dig.

Adam refused to consider taking Brunhilde back to Earl. The damage was not that bad, he insisted. The car was still running. The radiator was okay. They could get some touch-up paint that wouldn't show unless you looked closely. Cosmetic. No Earl.

"What about police?" said Ginger.

"They said no police," said Adam.

"Well, of course they said no police. They said no police because they're afraid of the police."

Adam hesitated.

"What are you gonna tell the cops?" said Fat Chance. "That we got muscle threatening us for videotapes that we don't even have? And even if we did have them, there's nothing there? And we don't have a description or a car or a plate? Or a reason? I mean, there's no

why here. Which makes more sense, that what Adam said happened, or that Adam kind of rear-ended somebody at a stoplight and maybe hit his head, which is where he got this story, from a hurt head and from the stress of having the car and his house busted into and ripped off?"

Fat Chance's version made more sense, even to Adam.

"There is no why here," said Adam.

"But," said Ginger, "the break-in does make sense if they were after tapes. Stealing the equipment was just a cover. The police would look for fenced equipment, and there wouldn't be any because they wanted the tapes. The equipment would end up in a landfill."

Fat Chance groaned.

"And when they discovered that they *didn't* have the tape," Ginger continued, "they were forced to come out into the open to get it. How does that sound?"

"Lovely," said Fat Chance, "except for the little fact that they got *all* the tapes, even the blank ones."

"Ah," said Adam. "Not the duplicates."

"I thought you said they got them all," said Fat Chance.

"Not the copies from the weekend shoot."

"There were no copies from the weekend shoot. You didn't make any."

"But they don't know that. We told everybody that we'd make duplicates. They assume we did."

Ginger was nodding. "And when they found only the masters, they assumed we had copies stored somewhere."

"But what tape?" said Fat Chance. "Somebody hiring muscle over a wedding? I mean, how embarrassing can a tape be when you had a couple of hundred people up close and personal? An inventory? Hours and hours of a guided tour of Gillis glitz? A real estate shoot, for crying out loud? A lousy house?"

"Maybe a dog," said Adam. "Maybe some owner who doesn't want to be sued over a vicious dog."

"So he risks assault and battery to protect his poochie?"

"What about that man changing his will?" said Ginger. "Somebody cut out of his inheritance wants the tape?"

Adam and Fat Chance looked at each other. Fat Chance shrugged. "I don't see any other likelies here. Now all we gotta do is remember the names."

"That's not all we have to do," said Adam. "We have a deadline."

"Leave them the yellow bag," said Ginger, "and in the yellow bag a note saying that we didn't make the backup copies, that in fact the blank tapes they stole

from the car were going to be the backups."

"That would make sense," said Adam. "They'll buy that."

"But in the meantime," said Ginger, "we'll talk to Sergeant Orr. And the twins will stay with my mother."

Orr couldn't help much. He told Ginger he'd ask the captain to route a blue-and-white by Adam's house now and again, but as far as springing manpower for a stakeout, well, he sure wished they could afford that, but right now they were running all their stakeouts on drug cases, he was sure she'd understand. Please keep in touch, he said, especially if anything changed.

"Doesn't believe us, does he?" said Fat Chance.

"Well, I don't see why not," said Adam. "After all, we're being threatened for something we don't have by someone we don't know for some reason we can't imagine."

"It is a little thin, from his point of view," said Ginger. "And we didn't exactly bowl him over with credibility when he was here. I don't know what he could do even if he did believe us."

Adam wrote the note: *To whom it may concern: We do not know what tape you mean. Even if we did, it would make no difference. We do not have any*

tapes; you took them all. We did not have a chance to make backup tapes. We do not have what you want. Thank you for leaving us alone.

"Should I sign it?" he asked.

"Hard for you to be short and sweet," said Fat Chance after reading it aloud.

Ginger took the twins to her mother's and ran to the store for yellow trash bags. They needed something in the bag for weight so that it wouldn't blow away and so that whoever picked it up wouldn't drop it immediately, thinking it was empty. Fat Chance snatched a book off the shelf and tossed it to Adam. Adam reshelfed it and had some difficulty choosing one he was willing to lose. Under pressure from Ginger, he finally settled on an out-of-date edition of the *Harbrace College Handbook*.

At eleven forty-five Adam placed the trash bag under a streetlight. If they'd had a camcorder, he would have set it up in the darkened living room and then they'd have something to show Orr.

But they didn't have a camcorder, and Adam couldn't sleep, and by twelve thirty, he was back in the living room in pajamas and slippers. The bag was still there. He turned the wingback chair toward the window and settled in. Stakeout, he thought, but didn't find the thought funny.

It was still almost eighty degrees outside, and not much cooler inside, and stuffy. The ceiling fan only stirred the heat and humidity around. The weather had to break soon, Adam thought. He dabbed his forehead with the back of his sleeve. At about four he went to the kitchen for some orange juice. When he came back, the bag was gone.

The weather broke the next morning, a series of storms with lightning and thunder and crashing rain. Ginger left early to see her mother and take the twins to day care; Adam stayed home, waiting for the phone call that he hoped wouldn't come. If they believed the note, they wouldn't call.

The phone rang around nine thirty. It was Ginger. She'd meet him at home for lunch, she said. In the meantime, he should take a nap because he'd been up all night, or he should go to school and get his work done and forget about Stars*R*Us. He waited until ten before leaving.

At the office, thirteen stories up, watching the rain smoke down, grey and silver, on the nearly empty parking lot below, his breath condensing slightly on the tinted glass, watching the jagged, popping lightning through windows tall

and narrow like loopholes in a castle built to withstand any siege, Adam felt safe and powerful. Then the phone rang.

"The games are over," the voice said. Then lightning flashed close and the line and the lights were dead at the same time, and the almost unheard sighing of the ventilation system died slowly, and Adam could hear real silence for a second or two before the glass-rattling crash of the thunder.

He tried the lights, the phone. Nothing. There weren't many other people in the building, but he could hear laughter, voices down the hall, around the corner. "Hello," he called, but heard only the slam of the far stairwell door. He called again. His voice echoed back. Thunder rumbled in the floor beneath his feet.

He still felt safe in the building, safer than he would outside, he thought, but Ginger would be going home for lunch.

The emergency lighting in the stairwells illuminated a spot on each landing, a spot on each section of stairs, all the way down, thirteen floors. Everything else was shadow. Every sound he made seemed magnified, seemed to echo forever, and it took forever to get to the bottom, to open the door onto the grey and hissing world.

He checked the back seat before he got into Brunhilde. Once

inside he relocked the door.

The windshield wipers couldn't clear the glass fast enough. Lightning flashed blue-white and blinding, and thunder crashed all around him. Traffic slowed. Water spread across the road, pooling in low spots, tires blasting it into arcing sheets. Adam passed an accident, dimly seen through foggy glass, the blue light of the police car discoloring everything as it flashed by.

He turned off the main artery onto residential streets, and finally onto his own, slowing to thirty, to twenty-five miles an hour, even though traffic was thin, the taillights of a car a couple of blocks up, the headlights of another coming on as it pulled away from the curb and started into the rain. As far as he could tell, there was nothing behind him.

The approaching car had its high beams on. Adam flashed his to let the driver know. The high beams stayed on. Adam flashed again. The car was a block away, and it seemed to be crossing the center line. Adam left his high beams on and blew his horn. He took his foot off the accelerator and slowed. The other car was half a block away, in Adam's lane, not going back to its lane, maybe accelerating. Adam sat on his horn and flashed his lights. The car came on. He pulled toward the curb

as if to park, and the car mirrored him. Adam pulled left, the car followed; pulled right, it followed, forty yards away, thirty, twenty. It would hit him even if he stopped dead. Adam swung hard right, crashing into the curb and over the curb, across a lawn toward a pine as straight and thick as a Roman column.

There was a horn blowing somewhere. There was rain coming down, rain on his head, and something else on his head, his cheek, something warm running in the cool wet of the rain. The windshield was gone. There was pain everywhere. The horn kept blowing, blowing, sounding his pain and anger and fear.

He was afraid that maybe even Ginger didn't believe him. Fat Chance didn't. Orr didn't. Orr had seen the car. Not a mark on it, he said, besides what the tree did, the curb did. And even if there had been somebody in his lane in that driving rain, even if he had avoided a head-on collision by swerving right, that didn't prove there was a conspiracy or that he was a victim. Bad visibility, terrible conditions, the other car might have drifted into Adam's lane accidentally.

If there was another car at all, Adam could see in Orr's

eyes. If you're not getting senile.

His headache was beginning to fade. If he told them it was gone, maybe they'd let him go home. One day in the hospital was bad enough. He'd rather hurt in his own bed.

His fingers and thumb were free, but the cast ran up his left arm from his palm past his elbow by about three inches, crooking his arm in a permanent ninety degree angle. He wiggled his fingers. Radius and ulna, the doctor said, clean, not comminuted, no little fragments floating around in there—not a bad break, he said, but didn't say that any break in a man Adam's age was a bad break, didn't say that he could get the cast off soon. Adam had the feeling that there was a lot that people weren't saying.

Except Earl. Brunhilde had been towed to Earl's and Earl had called Adam at the hospital, wailing and incomprehensible. Adam had held the phone away from his ear and at intervals had murmured that he was sorry.

He lied about his headache and they let him go home, so less than twenty-four hours after he had hit the tree, he was in his own bed. But he wouldn't stay there, in spite of Ginger's insistence. He was afraid that to stay in bed was to admit something that, once admitted,

would become real. He promised that he would nap, but he had to go to the living room at least, to sit in the wingback and do some reading, prepare for the semester. He finished reviewing *Beowulf*, the heroic lament and resignation at the bone-fire of the fallen hero somehow appropriate to his mood and his fears.

"Wasn't the will," said Fat Chance, sitting stiffly on the couch like a petitioner seeking a boon from the somewhat distant warlord. It was clear, Adam thought, sitting stiffly himself in the wingback, the stillness minimizing the pain, it was clear that Fat Chance had had a talking-to and that Ginger had done the talking. Whatever doubts Fat Chance had about the accident he kept to himself. Not a single allusion, not a hint, not even a meaningful look escaped Fat Chance's self-control. Adam knew it couldn't last, but he would enjoy it while it did.

"What wasn't the will?" asked Adam.

"The tape. I talked to Nations' lawyer about the will. There's a written copy, the legal copy, already signed and sealed and all that, so if you got cut out of the will, stealing the videotape wouldn't help. Matter of fact, if it was me, I'd want to keep that tape. Nations didn't

exactly come off like he was of sound mind, if you see what I mean. Might help get the will thrown out. Matter of fact, if we ever get the tape back, maybe we can up the price and sell copies to those schnooks that got cut out."

"But if it wasn't the will," said Ginger, "what was it?"

"Maybe we should hire a private investigator," said Adam.

Fat Chance was indignant. "What can he do that we can't? Let me handle this."

"Are we sure," said Ginger, "that all this concerns the weekend tapings?"

Fat Chance shrugged. "What else? Like Adam said, the only thing they don't have is back-ups of the weekend stuff, which there aren't any."

"It's possible that it's over," said Adam. He paused and cleared his throat, holding his head as still as he could. "It's possible that the accident was just that—an accident, I mean. Maybe probable. Likely, in fact."

Ginger and Fat Chance looked at him silently for a moment. "So what really did happen?" said Fat Chance finally, unable to restrain himself any longer.

"*Marvyn*," snapped Ginger.

"What I said happened did happen," said Adam. "But maybe the other driver was stupid rather than murderous. I mean, it's been almost thirty hours and we haven't had a

phone call. Maybe now they really know we don't have what they want."

The phone rang. The room was silent as they stared at the phone between the rings. Then Fat Chance went over, lifted the receiver, and handed it to Adam.

It was Earl. This time Adam could make out a few words through the weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. They were not encouraging. Adam slowly replaced the receiver.

He managed a thin smile. "Do you think there's someone else who . . ."

The phone rang again.

Adam shook his head. "I can't talk to him."

Fat Chance snatched up the receiver. "Look, Earl, old buddy, you . . ." He listened quietly for a moment, then stood holding the receiver, the dial tone audible to Adam and Ginger. "They said," said Fat Chance, "that we've had our last warning. The tape comes to them or they come to us. If they come to us, things will be very bad."

"Let's go through it again," said Ginger. "After you left the wedding, what did you do?"

"Maybe it's sweet little Susie," said Fat Chance. They stared. "You know, sweet little pneumatic Susie? The gold digger with all the IBM shares as soon as she wears the old boy

out? Maybe she wants the tape because it does make Nations look crazy and might help the relatives invalidate the will."

"If she wants the tape," said Ginger, "all she has to do is buy it. Now stay on the subject. What do you remember?"

"Tired," said Adam. "I remember being tired. I didn't want to see another video cassette as long as I lived. I didn't even bother to unload the equipment. I..." Adam's headache quietly evaporated. "We have the tapes," he said. "We've had them all along. I didn't unload anything on Sunday night. It's all in Brunhilde's trunk."

It was just after sunset by the time they got to Earl's, but a light was still on in the garage and Johnny finally heard their pounding and opened the door. He looked nervous.

"Earl's not here now, Dr. Clay."

Adam quietly thanked the gods. "We don't want Earl. We want Brunhilde."

"Who?"

"My car."

Johnny looked from one face to another and swallowed hard. "Earl's real upset. Earl's..."

"Kid," said Fat Chance in the well-deep voice he could pull up when needed, "where is the car?"

"Across the yard," he said, pointing through the grimy window to rows and rows of junked cars stretching out into the dusk. "All the way down, next to the river. Go straight down that way, turn right at the end."

"You gotta understand about Earl," Adam heard Johnny call as they started down the oil-stained dirt road between Fords on the left, Chevrolets on the right. The hulks of cars stretched in every direction. The air was cool and damp from the rains and smelled of rust and oil and wet steel and rotting tires. All the cars faced inward, headlights and grilles, empty eyes and empty grimaces, skull visions. Adam didn't like it.

The farther they went toward the river, the more recent the models became, paint a little brighter even in the fading light, more windshields intact, petroleum smells stronger, oil film puddles of water.

They reached the end of the row. They looked in both directions.

"He said right," said Fat Chance.

"Then let's go right," said a voice behind them. "And let's go together, and slow."

Adam turned. It was the man with red hair. His left hand was in the pocket of a light windbreaker. The pocket was pointed

at them.

"What do you want?" said Ginger.

"Shut up," said the man.

They walked on:

"Where's the damned car?"

said the man in a low voice, and Adam saw it off to the left, set apart from the other cars. It seemed to be surrounded by something. He squinted. Tires?

"Who's got the key?" said the man.

Adam raised his hand, as if he were in school. The man took the keys and poked Fat Chance in the back. "You. Take the keys. Get the tapes." He put his right hand around Adam's neck from behind. It felt like a vise. "Get them all." He squeezed. Adam yelped. "All," said the man.

Fat Chance started forward.

"You," the man said to Ginger. "Move out there." He pointed with his pocket to a spot in front of Adam. A breeze stirred from the river, soaked with the smell of gasoline.

"Cute," said the man in his low voice, "hiding the tapes in the trunk. Don't get cute now, fat man, don't reach for a tire iron or anything stupid because I can twist his neck and get a shot off before you can even turn around."

Adam had his shoulders hunched against the grip, his head spinning from fear and the smell of gasoline. He'd never smelled gasoline so strong be-

fore. Fat Chance was still a dozen yards from the car. Then Adam saw movement on the far side of the car, and a flare of light.

There was a great sound, a *fwooosh*, a displacement of air by heat, of dark by light, the shape of Fat Chance bent and running, silhouetted against an ocean of orange flame. The grip on his neck loosened as the man swore and staggered back, and almost by instinct Adam grabbed his left hand with his right and drove the elbow of the cast hard into the man's solar plexus, bending him double just as Fat Chance slammed into him, smashing him into the side of a pickup truck.

Fat Chance sat on his chest and belly until the cops got there, knees on his upper arms, fist at his bloody nose, daring him to make a move, to make his day, as he said over and over. There was no gun. The man's eyes looked wild and frightened in the rippling orange light of Brunhilde burning away on her bone-fire of old tires. Adam staring into the pyre, Earl somber and solemn in the distance, delivering himself of whatever elegy he deemed appropriate.

“What do you mean, we're not going to get anything from

him?" said Adam. "He's the one."

It had been a long night of filing complaints and answering questions, of fighting the ache in his head and his arm, of seeing again and again the image of Brunhilde burning, of finally staggering to bed. But through the long night he had been sustained by the belief that events were over and explanations would be forthcoming, that things would make sense at last. And now Orr had awakened him to tell him that it wasn't going to happen that way.

"We got him on assault and battery for last night. That's a fine, some jail time if we get the right judge. But it's worth more to him to pay the fine and do a little time than to turn evidence. Whoever hired him can make sure he gets rewarded for keeping quiet or that he regrets talking. This guy is just muscle. If he starts to waffle on his employer, he's in trouble."

"What about running me off the road?"

There was silence. "Look, Dr. Clay, don't get me wrong. He may have done that. I think he probably did. But that would last two seconds in court."

"What about the threat at the red light? I *know* that happened."

"But you can't say whether he drove the car in front of the

car in back or any car at all. You might get a judge to buy the story, but this guy'll go for jury trial. You'll never convince a jury. Look, I hate to say this, but this is all we get. He's not talking. There's no reason for him to talk. We'll investigate, but don't expect much."

"So," Adam said later, sitting with Ginger and Fat Chance over coffee, resting his cast on the kitchen table, the voice of Mr. Rogers talking to the twins in the background, "so we're right back where we started."

"Don't I wish," said Fat Chance. "Where we started was with a few thousand in equipment. Yesterday we still had it. Today we don't. Yesterday I was a small businessman on his way to financial independence. Today I'm just another guy with bills. Yester . . ."

"Now we really don't have the tapes, and now they really know it," said Ginger. She laughed. "In fact, it may be that our assailant gets a bonus because the tapes were incinerated."

"They should give the bonus to Earl," said Adam, smiling somewhat wistfully.

"Fruitcake," said Fat Chance, full of indignation. "Nutsoid. It could have been repaired. What's with this guy, he puts the torch to a car like that?"

Adam thought he knew, but Earl had simply walked past

them the night before, refusing to say a word. He wouldn't talk. The man with red hair wouldn't talk. Silence seemed to be the word of the day.

"I hope he liked his business while it lasted," said Fat Chance, "because when I'm through with him, he . . ."

"Nothing to do with you," said Ginger. "It wasn't your car."

Fat Chance drew himself up. "It was the Stars*R*Us company car."

They stared at him.

"Hey, wait a minute here," said Fat Chance. "You're gonna sue him, right? This is the only way we're gonna get anything back on the business. We gotta put it to him, Adam. We gotta."

"He thought he was doing the right thing," said Adam.

"Well, so do I. Indulge me a little, too, how about it? I firmly believe that suing him is absolutely the right thing."

Adam shook his head.

Fat Chance sank back into his chair, but his face lit up and he leaned forward again. "Okay, it was your car, but it was company equipment in the trunk, so I can sue, and I will."

"What about the insurance?" asked Ginger.

"Not enough. It just replaces equipment. We got lost work here, lost opportunity. He's in big trouble."

There were still arguing when

the phone rang. It was Johnny from down at Earl's, the voice said. "Earl wants me to ask you what do you want him to do with all that junk you had in the trunk."

Except for the wedding and Adam's being run down by dogs, the tapes were excruciatingly dull. Adam stood to stay awake. Fat Chance lay beached and snoring on the couch. Ginger looked over the notes she had made.

"Maybe there's a face at the wedding that doesn't want to be on camera," she said. "But if there is, I'll never spot it. I've been out of news too long."

"So you don't think it's the will tape," said Adam.

She shook her head. "I don't see how. There's nothing to gain or lose there."

"The real estate shoot? What could be there? Or the inventory?"

Ginger stared at the blank screen for a minute, then shrugged. "Wake him up. Coffee. Then we'll do it again."

Inwardly Adam groaned. He tried to focus on his watch. "It's, uh, midnight."

Ginger looked at her watch, surprised. "Tomorrow, then."

But at two A.M. Adam was shaken into reluctant wakefulness and dragged to the den. "Where was this?" Ginger asked.

Adam tried to focus on the

television. "Inventory, Gillis. Over in Greenwood Hills, you know, the rich . . ."

"No, no, where in the house? Where is this room?"

Adam squinted again. Books. Wooden mask. Wooden statue. Pottery.

"Library," he said. "Little room off another room."

"But there was another room with more books than this. Bigger, with desks, a computer."

"Study. Mr. Gillis's study." He waved his hand in the direction of the screen. "This one she called 'Mr. G's little retreat' or something like that."

"Got to be it," said Ginger.

Adam leaned toward the screen and frowned. "Got to be what?"

"Gillis collects artifacts," said Ginger. "Stolen artifacts."

Fat Chance was indignant. "What are you talking, stolen? You know any of that stuff was stolen?"

"No," said Ginger. "Not for certain."

"You know who this is? This is Kendrick P. Gillis. Mucho bucks. The big in big business. Maybe run for senator when old what's his name finally cashes in. This isn't Earl of Earl's Unusual, you know."

"I know. This is a man who has something to lose and who has the resources to protect it."

"Remember that. The resources to protect it. Even if it is him, what's our percentage? I mean, I don't make a practice of taking swipes at hornets' nests or waving red hankies in front of bulls. I'm not sure I want him not on our side."

"I think he's there already."

Fat Chance turned to Adam. "Tell her we can't do this."

"What do you suggest instead?" said Adam. "Wait for him to come to us again?"

"He won't come to us, even if it is him, which I'm not saying it is, understand. But if it is, he thinks the tapes are gone, the masters and the copies and everything. Look, we just call up his wife, we say we're sorry that we haven't gotten her the tapes but that because of, uh, technical difficulties, the tapes we made were destroyed. Then we say we'd be glad to come back and shoot again at a reduced rate, and she says no thank you, the birthday is past, and anyway Kenny got mad when I told him what I'd done, I don't know why, he likes his privacy, I guess." He paused for a quick breath. "And then, see, she goes to her husband and says that Stars*R*Us called and lost the tapes so he doesn't have to get so mad, and he'll smile and say he was sorry he got mad, he was tired. And he'll be happy, and he'll leave us alone, and he won't try to kill

our little business here before we ever get started. And we'll be happy, too." He breathed again. "Let's make everybody happy. What do you say?"

Adam turned to Ginger. "Makes sense."

"The first obligation of a new business," said Ginger, "is to fulfill its obligations. We owe Mr. Gillis a birthday present. I want to see that he gets it."

Fat Chance buried his face in his hands. "You're not my sister," he said. "We can't possibly be related."

Adam was reluctant. It was bearding the lion in his den, he said. Ginger said it was the kind of thing she had done in television news all the time, but she'd call Orr first if it made Adam feel better. "But we still don't have much to show him," she said. "And he won't want us involved anyway."

"Police business," said Orr. "If this man is behind the break-ins and the problem is the tapes, you don't want to be involved."

"We are involved," said Ginger. "And he's not going to shoot us dead in his office. If we send him the tape, he'll know we have copies. He'll want to see us. He may say something incriminating."

Orr shook his head. "If the stuff on the tape is stolen, we'll get him."

Ginger shrugged. "I'll bet

there's not a piece on the tape that can be traced to a museum theft, and he can claim the rest are from sites on private land. He can probably produce provenance for every one of them."

It took a couple of days for Orr to have the tapes reviewed by the appropriate museum and university experts. They told him there was no doubt in their minds that the artifacts were from looted sites and no way they could prove it. Gillis was most careful about insulating himself from the hands-on dirt.

"We need somebody who will talk to us," said Orr. "There's no way he had direct contact with the people who broke into your home and car. There's an intermediary somewhere. We need to make some links. We get some links, we can put some pressure there, we may have enough with what we get and with the tapes for probable cause and a search warrant. Then our people get hands on his collection. Might find something then, they say."

"Which brings us back to Stars*R*Us," said Ginger.

Orr nodded.

Ginger drafted a letter to Mr. Gillis, with innocent-sounding apologies for the delay and with high hopes of filling all the Gillis videotaping needs. "With Stars*R*Us," Ginger added after a moment's consideration, "U*R*the*Star."

Adam's eyebrows lifted of their own accord. "You *are* his sister," he said.

They sent the tapes and the letter by express mail. Gillis was very prompt in giving Stars*R*Us a call and saying yes, he believed there were videotaping needs he'd like them to handle. Would four that afternoon be convenient? Ginger said she'd have to check with the other directors, and that she'd get right back to him.

Orr wanted them to wear a wire. Fat Chance was excited. Adam didn't know what he meant.

"A sting," said Fat Chance gleefully. "We'll set that sucker up . . ."

"No, no," said Orr, sounding nervous. "Most important. Remember, we're working for a search warrant. What we get from you will help, but we don't want to spook him, so don't ask leading questions, don't try to trick him into admitting anything. This is not television, and this man is not stupid. Let him talk. All we want is a link to the man who broke into your home. Then we can work our way back up to Gillis. Your job is to listen. He'll probably try to buy you off. Just tell him you need to think about his offer. Be interested, be passive, be flexible, understand?"

"Hey," said Fat Chance, "no problem."

Adam didn't understand, but passive was something he was only too happy to be.

After a couple of practice interviews, Orr put Ginger in charge. Ginger let Fat Chance wear the wire to keep him from sulking.

Gillis was not attractive physically, big face, bulbous nose, small eyes—not much visual appeal, thought Adam, for his political ambitions. But he had this voice, deep and precise and quiet and confident and resonant and rich. Adam tried to imagine himself in front of a classroom with such a voice. *Hwaet!* he would say, and all their eyes would turn toward him and open. *We Gardena in geardagum . . .*

"I must apologize," Gillis was saying, "for any recent misunderstandings that may have occurred. Such matters are not, of course, handled directly by me; I must delegate most of what I eventually take responsibility for. My delegant . . ."

Delegant? thought Adam.

" . . . was perhaps overzealous and apparently hired someone who shared that same in some ways admirable but here clearly misplaced zeal. Not my fault, I grant you, but my responsibility."

He was going to keep things general. Adam realized. When

they were through, there'd be nothing on tape to link Gillis to anything.

Gillis turned his face to each of them in turn, smiling. Adam, Ginger, and Fat Chance sat in silence.

"Well then. Down to business. It seems to me the dream of every small businessman is to create a company with such potential for success that it is bought out by a larger, more efficiently managed organization. I think you have created such a company. I see great things ahead for—" he turned the letterhead toward him—"Stars*R*Us, and I am prepared to make you a handsome offer."

Adam looked at Fat Chance. Fat Chance wet his lips. Ginger said that they were certainly open to a variety of possibilities. Gillis smiled.

"Your company is new," said Gillis, "but I am prepared to offer fifty thousand dollars beyond your start-up expenses, plus five percent of the company's future pre-tax profit, if any. This offer buys you out completely. None of you will be involved in any way with the company. You need only wait for the quarterly dividends."

In the silence, Fat Chance's heavy breathing became audible. "A generous offer," said Ginger. "May we have some time to consider it?"

"Would twenty-four hours be sufficient?"

Ginger looked to Adam and Fat Chance. "I believe it would," she said.

"Fine," said Gillis, rising, extending his hand to Ginger first, shaking her one with both of his. "Thank you so much for coming in. This has been delightful." He offered his hand to Adam.

It was as slick a performance as Adam had ever seen. They were being bought off, but it looked as if they were being bought out. They had gotten nothing. He caught Ginger's eye, seeing there what he felt, that they were out of his league. At least, he thought, they had stayed calm and silent, and had given nothing away themselves.

Gillis shook Fat Chance's hand, said he looked forward to seeing him tomorrow. That was it then. Nothing else to do but leave. They started for the door.

Behind them Gillis suddenly laughed. "Wonderful," he said. "Just terrific."

They turned. Gillis was standing, hands on hips, shaking his head, smiling. It was a different kind of stance somehow, one consciously more open. He was changing the way the game was being played.

"You are good," said Gillis. "You were going to walk right out. I told Vernon you had to be

good. Vernon said you two were the biggest pair of dumb-asses he'd ever seen. A real Laurel and Hardy." He waved them back towards the chairs. "That was possible but most doubtful. Nobody could be as dumb as Vernon said you were. If not dumb, as I have just confirmed, then good. Very good. You must be P.I.'s. Who are you working for?"

They looked at each other nervously. It must have been the silence, Adam thought. He must be mistaking silence for competence.

"I'm not sure I understand," said Ginger. "We are, well, what we said we are. Stars*R*Us." Adam could see from her face that she thought it a ludicrous thing to say.

"I know you're not dumb," said Gillis, "so let's don't play dumb. No business license has been applied for, no zoning variance requested, no deposit against future taxes filed. There is no Stars*R*Us. What does that leave? P.I.'s. Working for . . ."

They were silent again. There was nothing they could say.

"Reynolds?"

Adam looked at Ginger and Fat Chance. He didn't know what to do. None of them did.

Gillis nodded. "Reynolds." He struck his open palm with his fist. "Son of a bitch. I knew I shouldn't have shown him."

"Nice collection," said Fat Chance. Adam eyed him angrily. Ginger remained impassive.

"Nice?" Gillis said. "What do you know? It's just a bunch of old stuff to you, doesn't mean a thing. I know what it is. I know what it means. I appreciate it. In a museum, what happens? The average tourist type walks by, gives it twenty seconds max, nothing, it might as well not be there. You could put anything there, they wouldn't know the difference."

"You're arguing," said Ginger, "that your theft is a moral act."

"I don't have to justify myself to you," Gillis snapped. He straightened his tie. "But we were talking business. You have an offer. Take it back to Reynolds. Or if you're freelancing, talk it over. Twenty-four hours. And if you're as good as I think you are, I'd like you on retainer." The voice was back again, oil on the waters. He would have made a good politician, thought Adam. Too good.

"He said he'd be right back. He said to ask you to wait." Johnny's eyes flicked nervously between Adam and Fat Chance.

"Well," began Fat Chance, "you just tell Earl that next

time he calls us, he'd better be here. I'm a busy man, and . . . "

"Thank you," said Adam, raising a hand. "I'll wait. Outside, if that's all right." He took Fat Chance's elbow and steered him out.

Fat Chance looked around the vast field of dead cars. "I don't see anything here worth having. If he thinks he's gonna pass off some hunk of junk on us . . . "

"On me, Marvyn. He said he'd replace *my* car. You don't have to wait."

"You gotta be kidding."

"Then would you mind waiting in the car? I'd like to talk to Earl alone."

"Come on, Adam, you . . . "

"Please."

Fat Chance started to say something, changed his mind, huffed off.

The lines and rows of rusting cars were even more depressing in broad daylight than they were at dusk. Adam started down the center track, heading for the river.

There had been a small reward for those few artifacts that had been stolen from museums, but most of the pieces had been moved along networks directly from vandalized sites so the only reward for them had been gratitude. And publicity, good publicity for Stars*R*Us, if they ever straightened out the no li-

cense/zoning/tax mess. The reward might even cover all that, leaving them basically where they had begun.

Except for Brunhilde.

At the end of the row, Adam turned right, but didn't raise his eyes from the dust stirring at his feet.

The meeting had linked Gillis to the lawyer Vernon and the break-ins and the redhaired carnivore, and everybody was blaming everybody else. Gillis said that he had asked Vernon to get the tapes, and Vernon, eager to please, a results man, had thought just to take them, had hired someone to break into Brunhilde and into their homes while they were sitting in Vernon's office. Vernon said that he had hired the redhaired man to buy the tapes and that he wasn't responsible if the man decided to pocket the money and steal the tapes instead. The carnivore was still silent. And, Adam knew, there were others involved who would never be caught, like the driver of the cream colored car when Brunhilde had been broken into. And for the ones who were caught, the lower they were, the greater the cost. The carnivore would serve time, Orr assured them. He hoped Vernon was reprimanded, at least. It was too much to hope he'd be disbarred. And Gillis—in the newspapers, Gillis apologized

for his mistakes in judgment, which made his crime sound like a simple error, like signaling left and turning right, or knocking over a glass.

Or running off the road into a tree.

He looked up and saw her before him, blackened and empty and broken, in a patch of soot-dark dirt on a little rise a few feet above the river. The sight made his stomach go cold, his heart lurch. He had owned Brunhilde since 1948. She had been new. She had been his only car.

The front end was crushed, bumper bent, hood buckled where she had hit the pine. The headlights were shattered. The front windshield was gone. The tires were burned to the rims. The paint was burned away completely, the bare metal dark and discolored and already rusting in the overheated August air. The little air vents just behind the front wheel wells were open like tiny hands.

It was only a car.

There was the sense of *gear-dagum*, year-days beyond his reach forever. It was hard for Adam to look. He tried to see what he was thinking. Boats went by below the hulk high on the blackened hummock, Brun-

hilde's body, burned and broken above the river, waters slick with oily runoff, rainbow surfaced, bright and stinking, on the mound above the boat-road . . .

"That was a good car," interrupted a voice beside him. Earl had come up unnoticed.

Adam stared beyond, to the sunlight shattering on the water. "Yes," he said. The light hurt his eyes.

"This is a good car, too," said Earl, taking Adam by the elbow and turning him around. There sat a thing huge and trembling to its running engine, black and silver, high above the oily dirt, the mutant offspring, so it seemed, of truck and station wagon. It soaked up the August sun.

"It's a Suburban," said Earl. "Three-quarter ton chassis. Any trouble you have, with anything, I'll fix it, free."

It was enormous. It was a tank.

"I don't think you can hurt this one," said Earl. "And even if you do, well, it's only a car. A vehicle, not a car."

A vehicle, thought Adam with an inward sigh, for the age.

"Hey!" shouted Fat Chance, running up. "Hey! Great car! Is this ours?"

UNSOLVED

by
Lawrence Treat

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the February issue.



Lovely Officer Lily Lang was called by Arnold Bean, who said his wife had tried to stab him and he wanted her arrested. He had a tear in his shirt that he said had been made by her knife.

"We had a slight argument," he said, "after which she lost control and threw a plate at me and then attacked me with the carving knife. Luckily I was able to defend myself, and she ran off, but I'm afraid of what she'll do when she gets back."

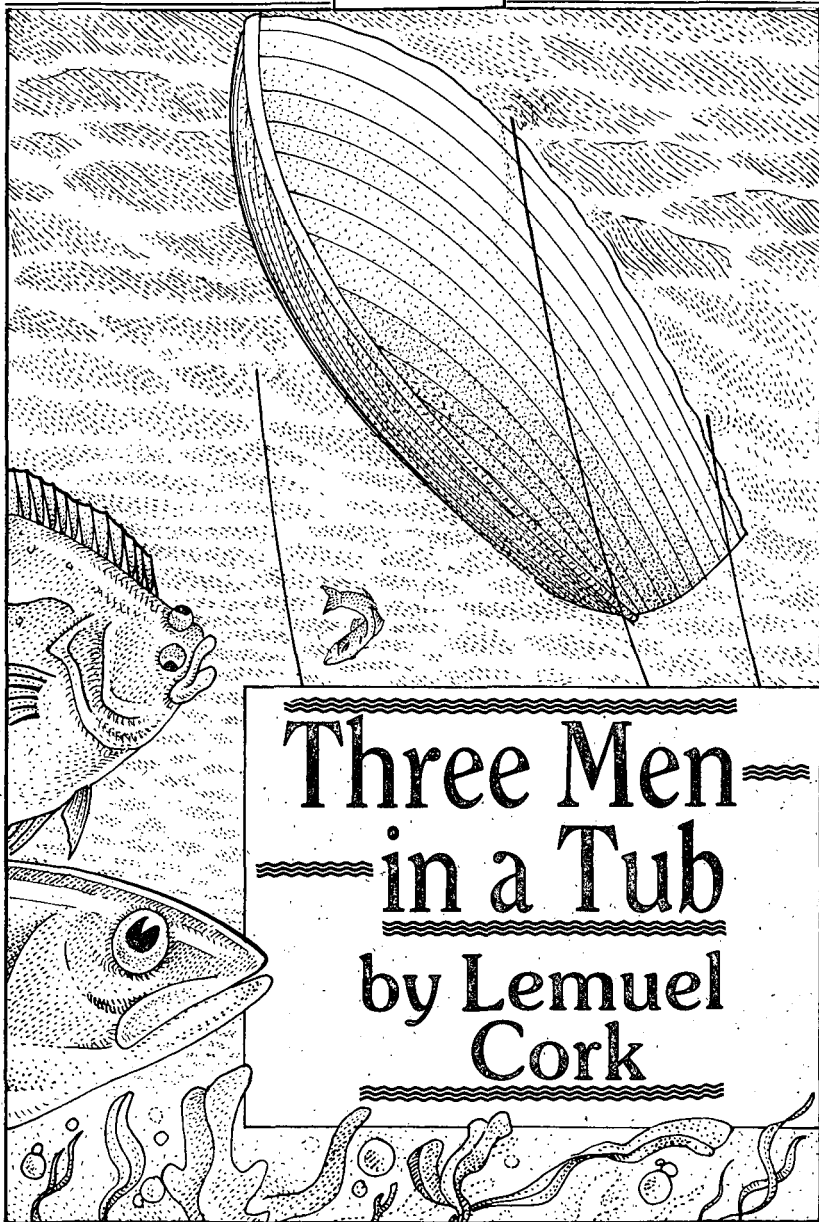
Lily examined the knife and the scene, and waited. What should she do when Mrs. Bean returns?

QUESTIONS

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. Is Bean's story plausible?
Yes ____ No ____ | 6. Did the Beans get along
with each other?
Yes ____ No ____ |
| 2. Were the Beans well-to-do?
Yes ____ No ____ | 7. Whose fingerprints are on
the knife?
His ____ Hers ____ |
| 3. Had they planned a
cookout for just the two of
them?
Yes ____ No ____ | 8. Had Mrs. Bean been
carving the meat?
Yes ____ No ____ |
| 4. Do you think that Mrs.
Bean threw the plate at
her husband?
Yes ____ No ____ | 9. Do you think she tried to
stab Bean?
Yes ____ No ____ |
| 5. Where had Arnold Bean
been sitting?
At the TV ____ At the dining
table ____ | 10. What do you think
happened, and what
should Lily do? |

See page 121 for the solution to the Winter Double Issue puzzle.

"Steak-Out," reprinted from CRIME AND PUZZLEMENT 2 by Lawrence Treat, copyright © 1982 by Lawrence Treat, illustrations copyright © 1982 by Kathleen Borowik, by permission of David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc.



Three Men—
—in a Tub
by Lemuel
Cork

““Y”ou know what’s going to happen,” Cap’n Andy said.
“One of us is going to get eaten.”

The three men looked at each other.

“Which one?” John asked at last.

“Not me,” Cap’n Andy said. “I’m the cap’n.”

“It ain’t gonna be me,” said the Bosun. “I’m the bosun.”

Cap’n Andy and the Bosun stared at John. He looked from one set of hungry eyes to the other. “No,” John said. Then again, more firmly: “No.” He hadn’t the strength, after four weeks at sea, to resist a third time. But he shook his head as forcefully as he was able. After a few minutes, he got his voice back. “Oh, no, you don’t,” he said, and fell silent.

“So what do you think?” Cap’n Andy asked the Bosun. “Cut his throat for supper tonight? You still got your knife, don’t you?”

The Bosun felt around his dessicated body until he found the long bulge of his knife in the pocket of what had once been a natty white uniform. “Yup,” he said. He licked his chapped lips with his dry tongue.

“Then it’s settled,” Cap’n Andy said. “Tonight we dine like kings.”

Panic returned some of John’s strength to him. “You can’t do it,” he said. “It isn’t fair. I’m the one who rowed us this far.” He was, too, which was why he was twice as tired, twice as hungry; and twice as thirsty as Cap’n Andy and the Bosun combined.

“You rowed us this far.” Cap’n Andy waved his hand over the side of the boat. The water receded evenly in every direction around them. There was no land in sight, that went without saying; but since they had left the wreck of the *Tractatus* behind, they hadn’t seen anything but water—and each other. No birds, no planes, no islands on the horizon, nothing. “You rowed us this far. Look around you, boy. We’re in the middle of nowhere, going nowhere. That we can do without you.”

“But you *told* me to row!” John insisted.

“Sure I did,” Cap’n Andy said. “Had to keep you occupied somehow. Now I’m telling you to lay down your life for your fellow crewmen. Don’t tell me you’d disobey your cap’n?”

“No, sir.”

“Like I said, then. It’s settled.”

“No, sir,” John said. “I mean, yes, but . . .”

“What *do* you mean, boy?”

John’s sixteen-year-old face was a mixed canvas of agony, con-

fusion, and sunburn. "I mean yes, I would disobey you. I would. What's the worst you could do to me?"

"Kill ya," said the Bosun, licking his lips again.

"You're set to do that anyway," John said.

"Yes," said Cap'n Andy, "but our way you die with honor."

"Honor be damned," John said miserably. "I'm not going to let you eat me."

"You're not going to let us? There are two of us. We're bigger than you are." Cap'n Andy pointed at the Bosun. "He's got a knife. Doesn't look to me like you've a lot of choice."

That's exactly how it looked to John, too, though he didn't want to say so.

"Yeah," he said. "Okay. Maybe so." John looked at the Bosun, always a knife-edge of a man; now his tattered uniform hung off him like a coat off a coat hanger. And Cap'n Andy, who had been so robustly, administratively fat. His drained, wasted skin now hung about him like... well, like the Bosun's uniform hung on the Bosun. "Yeah, well, okay, but—"

John was floundering and he knew it.

"But what?" Cap'n Andy asked.

"But then what?" John said, snatching at a new argument. "What do you do next? I mean, let's suppose you kill me and eat me—which is not for a minute to suggest that I think it's a good idea—but let's suppose. Then what? You've eaten, that'll give you a few more days, but how are you going to get anywhere? Who's going to row you? Look at you! Neither of you has the strength to row. That means you'll just drift until you get real hungry again, and then one of you will have to eat the other."

Cap'n Andy and the Bosun considered this, sizing each other up. "And *then* what?" John continued. "Then there's one of you left to die out here all alone. What good is that?"

After a moment's thought, the Bosun pulled his knife out. "Ah still think we should eat ya," he said, unfolding the blade.

Cap'n Andy nodded at John. "After we eat you, we *will* have the strength to row. That's the idea." Cap'n Andy looked at the Bosun, who nodded agreement.

John took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Well, he thought, if we don't do something we'll all die, and soon. And there are worse ways to go. There must be. Even if none come to mind right away. He swallowed heavily.

"All right," John said. "But promise me you'll make sure I'm dead before you start carving me up?"

"Of course, son." Cap'n Andy's face shone beatifically. The Bosun just looked as ravenous as ever.

"One other thing," John said. "Let me do it myself."

"Out of the question," Cap'n Andy said, the angelic glow fleeing his face. "I don't trust you, boy. You'd throw the knife overboard."

"No," John said, with a sigh of the utterest resignation. "I won't. What would be the use? There'd still be two of you, and you'd still kill me. Please, Cap'n, at least I would die by my own hand, and you could tell my parents—"

"All right, all right," Cap'n Andy said. "Bosun, give him the knife."

The Bosun extended the knife, handle first. John took it and threw it overboard.

Cap'n Andy stared at him with a unique look of despairing rage that, in all of human experience, can only be mustered up after weeks of starvation and exposure to the elements in a wooden rowboat in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. The Bosun just looked as ravenous as ever.

"You little fool," Cap'n Andy said. "You little goddamn fool."

"I said," John said, regaining his confidence, "I am not going to let you eat me."

"You shouldna done that," the Bosun said. "That was m'knife." He stood up in the boat. "That was *m'knife*. Ah'm hungry!" The Bosun tried to grab John by the lapels of his jacket, which would have worked better if John's jacket had had lapels. After struggling for a while in vain the Bosun tried to slap John across the face, but Cap'n Andy tugged his first mate back to their side of the boat.

"We shoulda cut ya up the first day out," the Bosun said, but he sat down.

"We're going to eat, boy." Cap'n Andy lurched to his feet and moved between John and the Bosun. He made a show of smoothing John's jacket. "We're going to eat, boy, or we're going to die. Maybe we're going to eat fish, but for that we need bait. Or maybe we're not going to eat fish, in which case we'll eat you—" Cap'n Andy raised a finger to silence John's interruption, which he knew was coming—"there is no other choice."

"There is another choice," John said. "We could eat you. Or him."

"I'm the bosun," the Bosun said.

Cap'n Andy laughed softly, uncomfortably. "And I'm the cap'n. Don't you see?"

"I don't see why any of us has to die, is what I see," John said. "Look at it this way. You kill me, and with this heat I'll spoil in

a day. Tops. You'll be lucky if I last a whole day. You're right, we have to eat. Maybe you're even right, we have to eat each other. But we don't have to kill each other to do it."

"How else is there?" Cap'n Andy said.

"Suppose we each cut off a toe." John could hardly believe he was offering to dismember himself. "A toe—we make tourniquets, and we each cut off a toe. We can use them for bait, catch fish. Couldn't we do that?"

"Nope," the Bosun said.

"Why not?" John asked.

"Ya threw m'knife overboard."

But Cap'n Andy was interested. The other two could tell because his eyes got real narrow and then shut altogether. John and the Bosun waited in silence for the Cap'n's eyes to open again.

Eventually, they did. "That's some idea you've got there, boy," Cap'n Andy said. John nodded a yessir nod. "What can we do for tourniquets?"

John glanced around the boat. "We can tear strips from our clothing. And three pieces of wood . . . maybe we could take up one of the seats, break it into three pieces." He looked Cap'n Andy in the eye. "What do you think?"

"Beats dying," Cap'n Andy said. "Better than nothin'."

The Bosun tapped Cap'n Andy on the shoulder.

"Yes?"

"He threw m'knife overboard," the Bosun said.

"So?"

"So what'll we do for a knife?"

"We'll make do, man," Cap'n Andy said. "We'll make do."

The lifeboat was rather too narrow for the arrangement they had in mind, but the three men made the best triangle they could. Six feet plus of Bosun lay along the long axis, curved slightly at the waist; John and Cap'n Andy filled in the other two sides. Each man had his trousers torn off at the knees, and the cloth they had gained in this manner was cinched around their calves and twisted into place with rough blocks of seat wood.

They had given enough time for the blood to leave and for numbness to set in. Now they lay mouth to foot, mouth to foot, mouth to foot. Cap'n Andy went over the agreement one last time: they would each bite off a single toe, biting down simultaneously. The toe would be the smallest toe on either foot, biter's choice. The toes would be spat out and used to bait fishing lines. If necessary, the process would be repeated.

John tried to suppress his dry heaves, but he couldn't. *What if I can't do it?* he asked himself. He glanced back at the Bosun, who already had John's left foot clamped between his teeth. *What if he can't do it?*

"Fellows," Cap'n Andy said, "men of the *Tractatus*, we are survivors and survivors we shall always be. We undertake now a truly distasteful measure, but a measure which speaks volumes about our unity and our ability to cooperate. Captain and cabin boy, officer and recruit, we are now one. The import of—"

The Bosun spat John's foot out to interrupt. "C'n we eat already?"

Cap'n Andy stiffened. "Yes, Bosun, in a minute." The Bosun nudged John's foot back into position while Cap'n Andy went on. "... our Father, who art in heaven, we thank you now for the bounty we are about to receive."

"Amen," John said through a mouthful of toes.

"Amen," said Cap'n Andy. "On the third beat, men." He pounded on the boat with his fist. "One . . . two . . ." On the third beat they bit down.

Some beneficent deity must have been passing by, for at that instant they were blessed with jaw strength equal to the task and pain so extraordinary that none of them remained conscious to feel it.

When John came to, he had nine toes and a throbbing pain where the tenth had been. Cap'n Andy and the Bosun were already conscious. The latter was smiling and picking his teeth with something small and white. The former was staring mournfully at the greyish-pink lump before him. The Bosun had a similar lump lying at his feet. John sat up and looked around. He couldn't see his lump anywhere.

"Boy," Cap'n Andy said, "we have to tell you something."

The images connected in John's fevered brain. "He ate my toe!"

The Bosun spat his toothpick to the floor of the boat. On closer examination, it turned out to be a well-gnawed bone. "Yup."

John turned to his cap'n for justice. "He ate my toe!"

"Yes, he certainly did." Cap'n Andy shook his head. "He certainly did."

John thought for a moment. "Well, then I get his. It's only fair."

A look of feral territoriality leapt into the Bosun's eyes. He grabbed up his toe and clamped it tight in his fist. "No ya don't."

"Cap'n," John said, "make him give me the toe."

"John, listen . . ."

"No, why should he get two? Make him give it to me!"

"Bosun," Cap'n Andy said, "the toe."

The Bosun shook his head fiercely. Cap'n Andy lunged for the Bosun, making the boat lurch, but the Bosun yanked his fist away. He popped the toe in his mouth and, with a little effort, swallowed it whole.

"Did you see what he did?" John demanded. "Did you see that?"

Cap'n Andy sat back and shrugged. With the violation of his body, a lot of the cap'n spirit had left him. He waved away John's complaint. "Look, boy, you'll get extra from the first few fish we catch, okay?"

Once again, it didn't look as if John had any choice. He wanted to say no, that bastard owes me a toe, and he'd better cough one up, you'll pardon the expression. What he said instead was, "Yes, sir."

Cap'n Andy slapped his hands down beside him. "Good. One happy family. That's us." He muttered this over and over as he fashioned a fishing line out of his toe, his sleeve, and the bone the Bosun had tossed away. "Line, hook, and bait," he said. "Line, hook, and bait."

"Ah'm hungry," the Bosun said again.

"Get him," John said. "He's hungry! He ate two toes and he's hungry?"

"Please, John," Cap'n Andy said as he cast the line over the side. "Shh. You'll scare the fish."

Now whether it was because John shouted, or because the bait was none too appetizing, or because the fish in the Atlantic are just plain *smarter* than your average fish, maybe we'll never know, but for whatever reason, they didn't get a bite all day. Each time Cap'n Andy drew the line out of the water, there was nothing at the end of it. This went on until just before dark, when he checked and there *really* was nothing there, just the sopping cloth. The toe was gone.

Cap'n Andy was of the opinion that a fish had sneaked it away. John was of the opinion that it had slipped off the hook and sunk to the bottom. The Bosun didn't voice an opinion, he just looked as ravenous as ever.

What was clear to all three was that more bait was needed, so they tightened the knots, lay in position once more, and bit the bullet.

This time there was less blood, and they didn't pass out. John

kept a careful watch over his toe, holding it in his lap and trying to stay awake through the night. Some time before dawn he did fall asleep, but his toe was there when he woke up.

All three of them baited fishing lines, and all three waited through the day without a bite. This time, however, the toes were still there at day's end, which meant that they could all eat. It was their first meal since the hardtack and dried fish had run out after their first week at sea.

Cap'n Andy said grace and cried a little, told his crew to chew each bite twenty-seven times for good luck. They gnawed away at the bones until late into the evening, and then cast them over the side.

The next day they went through the same ritual, but by the day after that they had given up on the fish and just ate the toes right away. And two days later, they each had to start in on the next foot.

By then John noticed that their legs were turning black and beginning to give off a powerful stink. The others didn't believe him right away, but soon it became too evident to deny.

Rather than waste meat which could mean the difference between life and death, they stepped up their program. Now they bit off as much as they could, and ate as much of it as hadn't already gone bad.

The Bosun started to fill out a little, but Cap'n Andy deflated steadily; and John grew to look painfully gaunt. He still rowed when he could, until he could no longer. Somehow they never got any closer to land.

One morning he thought he saw a boat, and he shouted out, "Cap'n Andy! Look!" Cap'n Andy looked and so did the Bosun.

"Why, it's an island," Cap'n Andy said. "We've found land! And look, there are women dancing on the shore."

The Bosun leaned over the side. "It's a steak," he said, looking in another direction entirely. "A big steak." John had to hold him at the waist to keep him from leaping out of the boat.

John decided that he probably hadn't seen a boat after all.

And that's the story, fellas and femmes, the sad-but-true tale of three men cast upon the bosom of Mother Nature. There's one more piece I've left off, but maybe it's best if I tell it, 'cause I bet you want to know what happened to the boys.

Only sometimes people don't believe it.

They kept eating each other, see, bite by bite, trying to stay

alive. And whenever he could, Johnny would row them a little bit farther, though without a direction to aim the boat it was probably worse than useless.

But it was inevitable that one day they'd see land, that they'd run aground somewhere. As it happened, they drifted into port, soft as anything, at São Luis de Maranhão. Early in the morning, so the piers were empty, and the sun was just starting to burn through the clouds.

So there was this boat, and you could hear voices coming from it, but for all the world it looked like the boat was empty. When it came knocking up against the pier, though, you could see that it wasn't. The seats had all been torn up and lay in pieces in the bottom of the boat, along with the oars. And in the middle of this mess there were three heads—just heads, nothing else, no necks even.

They were still, as you'd expect them to be, for a second. Then the smallest one, the youngest one, said real loud, "We did it!"

And the other two started to laugh.

That's when they told me their story. You see, they had managed to *cheat* Mother Nature, something no one had ever done before and that no one's done since.

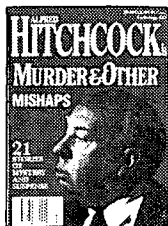
Naturally, I ran for my camera, but as I came back I heard the most awful sound in the world. I can't describe it exactly, but I knew what it meant—and sure enough, when I got to the boat, they had eaten each other up. There was nothing left but a pile of white shiny teeth.

I don't know why people don't believe it. I've got the boat right here to prove it. What's more, I've got the teeth.

That's right, friends, the teeth: the teeth that allowed them to survive, the teeth of the men who beat Mother Nature at her own game. Now in an hour or so you'll all be going out in your boats, and God willing, you'll all come back tonight—but if you don't, don't you think you ought to have one of these teeth with you?

That's right, step right up.

COMPLETE YOUR COLLECTION OF ALFRED HITCHCOCK CLASSICS!



MURDER AND OTHER MISHAPS

Want to catch a murderer? Want to catch a thief? Linger in the darkness of a turreted mansion or merge with the shadows in a wax museum. Follow the written paths of these 21 outstanding practitioners of crime on paper.

SHROUDS AND POCKETS

The pockets of the wicked are filled by insurance fraud, house burglary, confidence games, forgery, drug smuggling and counterfeiting. 29 thrilling stories expose the desire for revenge, jealousy and greed; and remind us that shrouds have no pockets.



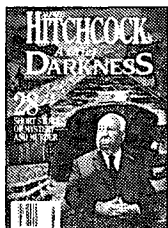
MOST WANTED

21 of our best stories from 1980-1985, that will capture your imagination and keep you enthralled through 398 action filled pages. Hard hitting crime stories, ghost stories and tales of suspense will puzzle you until the end.



THE SHADOW OF SILENCE

Twenty-eight stories—Twenty-eight occasions for nefarious activity by the likes of thieves and scoundrels, murderers and mischief-makers. Unsettling little surprises come in the mail, mystifying phone calls are made as well as received; corpses converse; and reality is tampered with.



A BRIEF DARKNESS

The stuff of which nightmare is made... subtly clad, so that its implications don't sink in all at once. 28 unnerving tales laced with the unexpected, clever solutions, and that Hitchcock humor.

A MYSTERY BY THE TALE

Twenty-eight great tales that will thrill, chill, divert, beguile, pique, enthrall, entertain, absorb, intrigue, galvanize, disquiet, startle, titillate, provoke, electrify, stimulate, excite, arrest, engage, deceive, seize, mystify and baffle you.



Mail to: **ALFRED HITCHCOCK
ANTHOLOGIES**
P.O. Box 40
Vernon, NJ 07462

Enclose your check or money order
for \$ _____ after indicating
your choices at right.

NAME _____
ADDRESS _____
CITY _____
STATE/ZIP _____

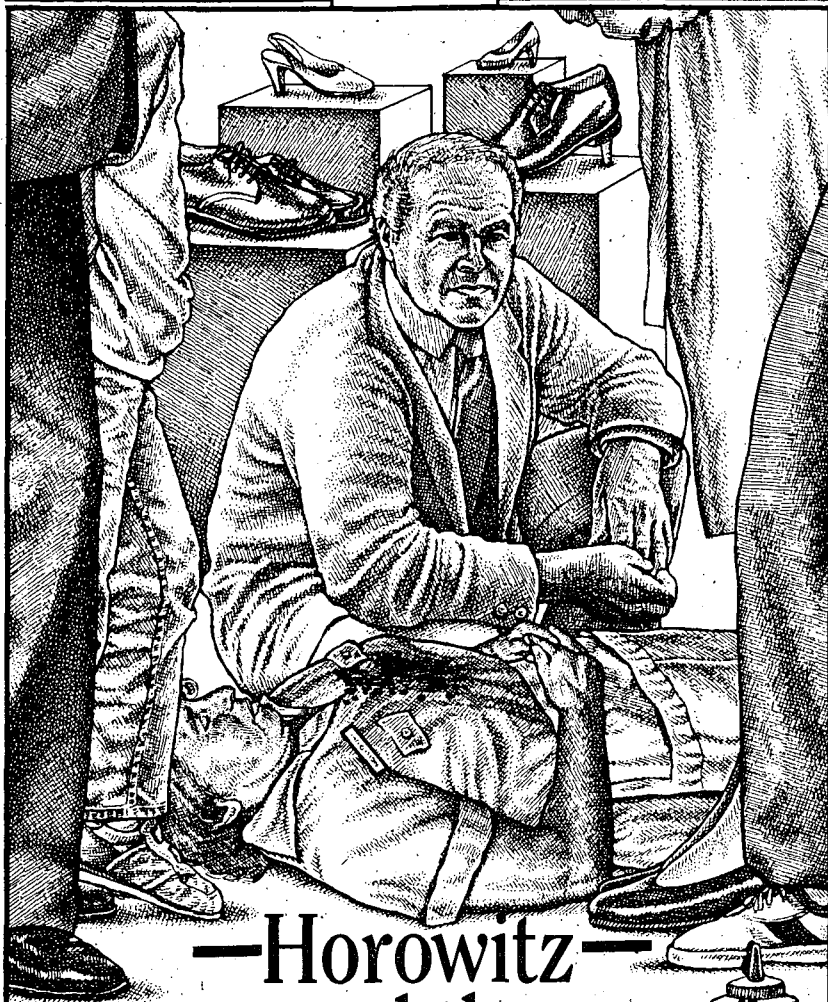
- ☐ #27 MURDER & OTHER MISHAPS (\$4.50)
- ☐ #26 SHROUDS AND POCKETS (\$4.50)
- ☐ #25 MOST WANTED (\$4.95)
- ☐ #24 THE SHADOW OF SILENCE (\$4.50)
- ☐ #23 A BRIEF DARKNESS (\$4.50)
- ☐ #22 A MYSTERY BY THE TALE (\$4.50)
- ☐ #21 WORDS OF PREY (\$4.50)
- ☐ #19 GRAVE SUSPICIONS (\$3.50)
- ☐ #18 CRIME WATCH (\$3.50)
- ☐ #17 MORTAL ERRORS (\$3.50)
- ☐ #16 A CHOICE OF EVILS (\$3.50)
- ☐ #15 BORROWERS OF THE NIGHT (\$3.50)
- ☐ #14 FATAL ATTRACTIONS (\$3.50)
- ☐ #13 DEATHREACH (\$3.50)
- ☐ ANTHOLOGY #8 (\$3.50)

Please allow 6 to 8 weeks for delivery. Available only in the U.S.

HBGC-1

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FICTION



—Horowitz—
—and the—
Bottle of Ket hup
by D. D. Dunnom



© CHIRONNA 87

Sidney Horowitz had a special talent—it was probably the only special thing about him. Sid looked and acted like your typical shoe salesman—which he was. Slightly shorter than average; slightly plumper than most of us see ourselves; more than slightly bald in the rear of his graying head. You must have seen hundreds like him.

But Sid *did* have this talent. No, it wasn't for guessing the right size shoe for his customers—he was as bad at doing this as most shoe salesmen. His talent was extremely logical thinking, logical and, only occasionally, imaginative. This did him no good. If a woman customer insisted that she wore only a size six, after struggling to get her foot into a size nine, Sid would try to convince her that it was impossible to fit her with a size six—he lost a lot of sales this way.

Anyway, Sid worked at Footes Shoe Store in the mall. The store was stuck right between the Happy Burger and Nifty Gifts; the location did nothing to elicit an image of a high class footwear establishment, but at least it was in the middle of heavy traffic. The kids from high school and junior high liked to bring their burgers into the store and sit in small bunches, dropping ketchup,

mustard, and greasy paper napkins on the chairs while Sid was off trying to find a pair of pink sneakers in just the right shade. The manager, Jerry Adelman, soon caught on to their strategy and posted a large sign in the entrance: NO FOOD!—NO DRINKS! —NO CHILDREN WITHOUT PARENTS! It might have worked, but the kids, after hours of conditioning in school, never read the sign.

One afternoon, when Sid was in the stockroom looking through the shelves trying to find a pair of gold sneakers with “you know, blue stripey things on ‘em,” he heard a pop, like a shot from a .22, from the front of the store. Since this was an unusual occurrence in the mall, he concluded that something unusual must have happened. He was right.

Walking quickly to the store entrance, he saw in front of the store a heavysset, middle-aged woman lying on her back, legs stretched out, a bright red stain on the front of her white dress. It was Belinda, the manager of the Happy Burger; even with her eyes open, she looked dead. He quickly scanned the crowd of kids and other mall dwellers who stood, mouths hanging open, in a semicircle around her. The silence made him uneasy; for once, the kids weren't gabbling at each other.

Jerry came up behind Sid and stared down at the body. "What the hell happened?"

"It's Belinda," Sid said slowly, the cogs in his brain just starting to mesh.

"I can see that," Jerry complained. "What happened to her?"

Sid walked over to the body and knelt beside it, then bent and stuck his face over the red stain. He remained like that for a few seconds, then, with a grunt, pushed himself up and walked over to the Happy Burger and looked in. He walked back to where Jerry was standing, looking uneasily at the crowd. "She had a heart attack."

"Whaddya mean, heart attack? Didn't ya hear the gunshot? Somebody shot 'er, ya jerk."

"Heart attack," Sid repeated. "That stain on her chest — ketchup."

"Howdya know that?"

"I smelled it," Sid commented calmly.

Jerry looked at Sid with disgust. "Is that what you were doing down there? Smelling her—like a dog?"

"Of course. How else could I tell?" His logic was unarguable.

By this time the three-man mall security force had shown up and pushed the crowd back while they waited for the police

to arrive. They didn't have to wait for long; only five minutes later two Fulton Township policemen worked their way through the crowd to the body. The older and larger one, Sergeant Heinz, looked over the crowd, trying to identify a likely witness. "Anybody here see what happened?" he asked.

A woman with curlers sticking out from under a green scarf spoke up. "I didn't see nothin' —but I heard a noise like a gun goin' off," she answered nervously.

Heinz wheeled around and faced Sid and Jerry still standing in the store entrance. "You fellows see anything?"

Jerry looked a warning glance at Sid, then answered, "We were in the back of the store. I heard a shot, too. Then I ran out with Sid here."

"Sergeant," Sid said, ignoring the sharp poke in the ribs that Jerry gave him, "I think you'll find she had a heart attack. That's ketchup on her uniform."

Heinz turned and stared down at Belinda, then stepped closer and leaned over her inert body. After a long few seconds he muttered, "By God, it *is* ketchup!" He straightened up and walked over to Sid. "What do you know about this?"

"All I know is what I see. She's got ketchup on her uni-

form and blue lips—I'm good on colors. It had to be a heart attack." Sid smiled his best the-customer-is-always-right smile.

"You a doctor, mister?" Heinz was unimpressed by the smile.

"No. I sell shoes in the store here. I notice you could use a new pair."

Automatically, Heinz started to look down at his feet, but caught himself and glared at Sid. "I don't need no wise remarks from you, mister." His round face reddened as he realized he had lost control of the situation. "Say, if you're not a doctor," Heinz resumed the offensive, "how is it you think she had a heart attack? And what about that shot the lady and this other man heard?"

Sid maintained his smile and drew his five foot frame erect. "It's got to have happened this way. You see, Belinda is —was—the manager of the Happy Burger. She sits at the register and takes the customers' money; she's a big lady and not too young, and her feet get tired from standing—I tried to sell her some good shoes, but she said our prices are too high. Anyway, like I said, she sits at the register and takes in the money. Now there's always a bunch of kids in there buying burgers and colas—I know this because they bring them in here. Okay, today one of these

kids takes a squeeze bottle of ketchup while he thinks Belinda isn't watching and tries to sneak out with it and take it to his friends, who are in the shoe store making a mess. But Belinda sees him and gets off her stool, runs around the counter, and goes after him. She grabs him right in front of this store and gets a squirt of ketchup on her while she's trying to take it away from him. Naturally, between the running she did and fighting with the kid, she puts a strain on her heart—which she told me was not in good shape. Bingo, heart attack. That's why the blue lips."

Heinz rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand. "You didn't see any of this, huh?"

"No. But it's the way it had to happen. If you turn around and look over the people standing there, you'll see a blond kid with ketchup all over his right hand."

The sergeant turned and carefully scanned the crowd. Sure enough, there was a lanky teenager, in faded bluejeans and a wrinkled T-shirt, standing at the front of the crowd, eyes bugging out of his pale, pimply face and red goo dripping from his right hand. On the shiny terrazzo in front of him was a plastic ketchup bottle. Heinz yelled at his partner,

"Grab that kid with the red hand." The young cop and a security guard had no trouble in doing this; the boy was in shock and was frozen in place.

Heinz was just about to tell one of the security men to call an ambulance for the body when an unexplained fact jumped out of hiding from someplace inside his head. He walked back to where Sid was standing.

"Okay, we can check out your guess about what happened with the kid. What about the shot?"

Sid looked hurt. "It wasn't a guess. It's the only reasonable way to explain what I saw. Besides, from personal experience, I know a little about heart attacks.

"But I have to admit the shot had me stumped for a minute. You see, once I had found that she hadn't been shot, I knew there wouldn't be any gun. So I asked myself what could make a noise like a gun? Too many things can sound like a gun; that was the problem. Then I looked at the Nifty Gifts store next to us. Look, see those shiny silver balloons tied to the table there? There are always four balloons, one tied to each corner of the table. But how many do you see? Three! Lift up the boy's shirt. You should find what's left of the missing balloon there. It got busted when Belinda had her arms wrapped around him

trying to hold him. That kid must be a regular klepto."

The sergeant looked at the three balloons floating in front of Nifty Gifts and shook his head slowly. "Mister," he said to Sid without taking his eyes off the balloons, "I don't know how you do it." He looked down at his shoes. "Maybe I *could* use a new pair."

"Tell you what, sergeant, come back next week. We're going to have a sale on some real high-quality brogues. Ask for me—Sid."

Heinz didn't bother to answer. Still looking at his shoes, he walked over to his partner and the security guard, who were holding the boy's arms behind his back. "Let's go," he said wearily. He led the three—some towards the mall entrance. Halfway there, he stopped, turned, and yelled at the two remaining security guards, "You guys get the body picked up, okay?" He resumed his course towards the doors.

Jerry and Sid stood in front of Footes until the crowd, which was now talking excitedly, dispersed. Jerry put his hand on Sid's shoulder. "C'mon, Sid. We can't make any money standing here."

Sid looked at him, his face showing concern. "What do you suppose they're going to do with the kid?"

"I don't know. What can they do to him?—throw him in jail for swiping a balloon—trying to swipe a bottle of ketchup? He didn't hurt anybody. It wasn't his fault that Belinda had a heart attack."

Sid and Jerry walked slowly back into the shoe store; Jerry still had his hand on Sid's shoulder. "You know," Sid said confidentially, "they aren't going to find the missing balloon under the kid's shirt. That wasn't ketchup on his hand; that was blood."

"Whaddya mean, blood?" Jerry dropped his hand from Sid's shoulder and faced him.

"I mean the kid was bleeding. He probably got hit in the hand from that gunshot we heard."

Jerry's expression was a mixture of surprise, disbelief, and horror. "You mean that story you told the sergeant was all made up?"

"Well," Sid answered thoughtfully, "I imagine the part about the ketchup bottle will turn out to be right. But they won't find the missing balloon. I sort of lied to the sergeant; that balloon was swiped by some kid early today; I saw him do it. I only wanted not to get involved in trying to explain the gunshot until I had a chance to do some thinking about it. The sergeant will just think that I'm a lousy guesser

when he doesn't find the balloon."

Jerry sat down in one of the fitting chairs. "Why would someone shoot the kid?"

"I don't know," Sid said, shaking his head. "Maybe it was an accident, or maybe—" He turned and walked out of the store to where the crowd had been standing. He looked back and forth for a minute, then walked over to a bench in the center of the mall, stooped and picked something up and put it in his suit coat pocket, and looked around again before returning to the store.

"Sid, whaddya doing out there?" Jerry asked him.

"Nothing, really. It just occurred to me that someone might have forgotten something."

Jerry sighed. He got up and started for the office in the rear of the shoe store. "As long as there's no customers, why don't you finish the stock inventory?" He disappeared through the office door.

Sid shrugged his shoulders and ambled back to the stockroom. When he was sure he was out of sight, he reached into his pocket and took out the plastic ketchup bottle that he had picked up from the ground outside. Despite having spurted a sizable amount of its contents on Belinda, the bottle was not empty.

Sid turned the bottle around in his hand, examining it carefully. It looked undamaged, considering that it must have been kicked about by the crowd. No, wait, there were scratches on the label; the "C" was almost scratched off so that the label read: "KET HUP." Sid looked around the shelves and found his coffee cup and, after unscrewing the bottle top, shook the bottle's contents into the cup. He inserted his right index finger carefully into the ketchup and wiggled it around; then he removed the finger from the cup, licked it clean, and placed the cup and the empty bottle on a high shelf in the stockroom. He went into the front of the store, over to the counter, where he made a phone call.

The next day things were back to normal in the mall. Happy Burger was back to vending greasy kid stuff; a woman from their office downtown had come out to be temporary manager. The kids were back in Footes Shoe Store keeping Sid busy looking for colored sneakers. Jerry was standing in the front of the store looking at the sign, contemplating making it larger. His concentration on the problem of the sign size was shattered by shouts and the sound of scuffling from Happy Burger. He took a few

steps towards the source of the noise and craned his neck to see what was happening.

A cop, in fact the same young one who had come with Sergeant Heinz the day before, had pinned a small, dark-haired man against Happy Burger's counter and was, with difficulty, holding the man's arms tightly on the counter. The temporary manager was standing by the register, mouth agape.

The young cop spotted Jerry. "Hey, you, call your security guards. Then call the station and tell Heinz to get over here."

Jerry ran back into the shoe store, almost knocking a box of sneakers out of Sid's hands. He pressed the button to call the guards and dialed 911. In a few minutes the space in front of Happy Burger was filled with police, security guards, and a crowd of teenagers.

A minute later, carrying an object in each hand, Sid walked out of the shoe store over to Heinz, who had arrived with reinforcements.

The little dark-haired man, who by this time had been cuffed and was being held by two policemen, scowled at the objects that Sid placed carefully on the counter.

Heinz picked up the ketchup bottle that Sid had set on the counter and held it next to one he was holding. Both labels on

the bottles had the "C" almost scratched off. "Can't hardly tell the difference between these. You do good work, Herwitz."

Sid smiled his best "you're-right-I'm-wrong" smile. "Excuse me, sergeant, the name is 'Hor-o-witz.'"

Before he could say anything else, a tall fat man, wearing a double-breasted gray suit that made him look fifty pounds heavier than his modest two hundred fifty, pushed his way through to Heinz. "I'm Maurice Glick; I own the jewelry store on the other side," he announced. Then he spotted the scowling little man. "That's the one. I remember he was in the store yesterday. I told Julia to keep an eye on him." He pushed up against Heinz, looking anxiously down into his round face. "Where is it? Did you find it?"

"Mr. Glick," Sid interjected, "look here." Sid reached into the coffee cup and pulled out a small object covered with ketchup. He drew a paper napkin from a dispenser on the counter and carefully wiped most of the red sauce off the object. A glittering brooch appeared; even with traces of ketchup on them the diamonds sparkled brilliantly in the lights. Sid handed the napkin and brooch to Glick, who held it up to his face to examine it closely.

Glick grinned like a gar-

goyle. "It's fine." He turned to Sid. "How can I thank you? This is an expensive piece; you should have a reward." Glick's happy expression began to fade. "Of course, business has been bad lately."

"You owe me nothing," Sid said modestly. "Of course, if you should want a nice new pair of shoes, I would appreciate it if you would come see me—we're right across the mall, you know."

Sergeant Heinz looked at the two. "Why don't you fellows settle this later? Right now I need to talk to Mr. Her—Horowitz—and get some facts. Okay?" He took Sid by the arm and walked him back to the shoe store. Jerry followed them.

Heinz sat in one of the chairs and motioned Sid to join him. "I suppose it won't surprise you to hear that we found a .22 revolver in that guy's pocket; one cartridge had been fired."

"I didn't know it was a revolver," Sid smiled.

Heinz's face was a picture of forbearance. "I also suppose that you won't be surprised to hear that the kid—incidentally, he only had a small flesh wound in his right hand—the kid we took in yesterday told us that a man he had never seen before offered him ten dollars to get a certain ketchup bottle from Happy Burger and bring it to him."

Sid looked thoughtful. "Ten dollars is a lot of money. I would have offered him a buck."

"Uh-huh. Well, where was I? Oh yeah, we'll find out from that guy how the brooch got into the ketchup bottle, but I don't suppose you would like to let me know how you figured this thing out?"

Sid looked up at Jerry, who was standing bewildered, in front of them, looking first at one, then the other. "It's all right to take the time?" Jerry nodded, his mouth open as if he were about to say something meaningful.

"Yesterday, when I saw the kid with the red hand I knew he didn't have ketchup on his hand; blood doesn't look like ketchup—I told you I have a good eye for colors. So, anyway, I knew the kid must have been shot—I apologize for the story about the balloon—and from the noise the shot made, I knew it was a small caliber gun, like a .22.

"Now here was the problem: Why would anyone want to shoot a kid for swiping a bottle of ketchup? A bottle of ketchup isn't worth shooting anybody for. Answer: there was something important about that bottle. So I looked around after everyone had left and found it still on the ground—it's a good thing that nobody minds how

messy this place is. The first thing I noticed about the bottle was that one of the letters in the label had been scratched off. But that wouldn't make the bottle valuable so it had to be something else. Of course! There had to be something in the bottle that made someone willing to shoot a person to get it.

"When I poured the ketchup out, I found the diamond brooch. I could have just put it in my pocket until today, but sometimes I like to be a little dramatic. Then I called you and told you to have somebody keep a watch on Happy Burger for someone who was going to try to steal another bottle of ketchup. It was obvious that the thief would try again to get the brooch, so I went next door and marked another bottle.

"I wasn't sure, but I suspected that the brooch had been taken from Glick's. That's why I told you you were going to get a call from him.

"The rest you know. The thief came back to Happy Burger, hoping that the bottle had been returned, and when he put the bottle I marked in his pocket, you grabbed him. Perfectly logical, don't you think?"

Heinz had to smile. "It may have been logical to you. But you didn't tell me why the thief shot the kid."

Sid thought for a minute.

"It's possible that when he saw him run out of Happy Burger, then struggle with Belinda; he was afraid the kid would tell why he took the bottle so he decided to kill him—you know that little guy looks kind of nasty. He may have thought that with all the commotion the kid and Belinda were making no one would pay any attention to the sound of a shot. Fortunately for the kid, he missed."

Heinz got up. "Well, that was quite a piece of detective work you did, Horowitz. I'm going to have to put all this into my report. Maybe you'll be offered a job in the department."

"That's okay; I like my job here. Besides, Jerry wouldn't be able to get along without his best salesman."

Heinz grinned. "I understand." He started to leave,

then turned around. "You've got a good man there, Adelman. Don't lose him." He turned again and headed for the Happy Burger.

Jerry looked down at Sid, who was sitting relaxed in the chair. "So, Mr. Detective, how about getting back to work? I think already you've spent too much time with Heinz and ketchup." Jerry guffawed. "I get it. Heinz—ketchup—Heinz—ketchup. Hey! pretty clever." He walked back to his office chuckling to himself.

Sid remained in the chair, smiling at the floor. Imagine me, he thought, Detective Sidney Horowitz. Nah, I couldn't stand the excitement. Besides, I think I've got two new customers coming in. I wonder if we've got something in Glick's size?

SOLUTION TO THE WINTER DOUBLE ISSUE

"UNSOLVED":

<i>Agent:</i>	Clyde (Snow)	Bonnie (True)	Alex (Spoon)
<i>Contact:</i>	Bruce (Lie)	Tim (Grass)	Craig (Quick)
<i>City:</i>	Bangkok	Bombay	Budapest
<i>Key:</i>	White	Blue	Silver

<i>Agent:</i>	Ivan (Market)	Lucy (Alert)
<i>Contact:</i>	Mike (Pitch)	Scott (Beet)
<i>City:</i>	Baghdad	Bucharest
<i>Key:</i>	Black	Red

FICTION

The Thing Under the Bed




by Lane
Olinghouse

Illustration by Tim Foley

122

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



From childhood we fear the dark. We have a biologically programmed instinct to do so. Our original ancestors lived longer, safer lives by avoiding the dangers crowding the darkening forest path.

So we fear the dark alley, the unlit park, the gloom at the foot of the stairs—and the black, impenetrable space under the bed.

None of us escapes this universal apprehension or manages to put it aside, fully, even after adulthood and maturity. The shadowy area under the bed haunts us all, admit it or not. We feel its threat and menace—not in our bones: deeper, in our more sensitive souls. (Those who would jeer at the idea may test the truth of it, this very night, by permitting a foot to escape the protection of sheet and blanket and hang down over the edge of the bed; how quickly the foot is drawn back to warmth, comfort, and security!)

That is not to say today's civilized man or woman maintains a conscious awareness about the place and what it may harbor. For the most part we don't think about it at all. We go to bed, we read, we make love perhaps, we turn off the light, we sleep.

Only rarely do we remember the childish dread of under-the-bed. And when we do, we scoff at those old, foolish fears.

That is, most of us. There are a few . . . there are a few, like me, who not only have not overcome a lifelong horror of the thing that hides under the mattress, beneath the springs; the dread remains a constant nightly bugaboo.

It does me no good to lift the blanket and squint into the gloom. I may see nothing there, but does that mean the under-bed space will remain unoccupied when I drop the blanket and reluctantly crawl into bed? A flashlight used to expose the dim recesses back under the headboard does little to dispel the doubt. The light may reveal nothing but tufts of old lint and hair and a forlorn sock, but with the return of dark under there and a quick clamber into bed, the menace, in my mind at least, also returns.

Just recently, I made a supreme effort to overcome this old, incapacitating fear. I decided to lie prone through the long night hours, my flashlight illuminating the underspace. If the evil came, I would at least see the damned thing. But the ploy did not work. Before an hour dragged by, I began to feel a presence—not under the bed, mind you, but on it.

Shaking as from the aftereffects of illness, I forced myself to rise—slowly, slowly—and peer across the covers. Of course I saw nothing—except (was it?) a slight indentation on the top blanket.

The—the—what is it, do you suppose?—was not there.

Haggard, exhausted, but sleepless, I crawled between cold sheets and shivered the night away, my agitated brain churning the desperate situation. Surely, there must be a solution.

And, of course, there was. I'm amazed at how simple it turned out to be. Since I could not rest easy *in* bed for fear of what lay beneath it, I would henceforth sleep *under* it.

But, no, not under my own lonely, haunted bed. I still shuddered from almost finding some beastly thing in my bed while looking for it below. No, I'd seek another's bed and lie beneath it to get my rest. A sane, sensible solution! With me under the bed and someone else in it, the malevolence could not attack from either quarter. Then I would rest. Then I would sleep.

It took but a short while to locate the right bed—that of an acquaintance who lives alone and who leaves early and comes home late from work. Surreptitiously obtaining a duplicate key to the apartment fortunately presented no difficulty. Thus I have not even had to let my friend know of this admittedly unusual undertaking. I can enter the deserted apartment, take my place under the bed before my unsuspecting friend returns, and stay until the following morning after my friend departs.

And it works. It works! It works wonderfully. The space under the bed is quite cosy. A thin air mattress cushions my body into deep relaxation. I need but a single blanket for warmth. And I sleep now. I sleep the night through. In fact, I have thrice soundly slept from dark to light when my friend stayed out overnight.

Of course, this new-found security is not entirely free of concern. An uneasy thought troubles me, a little. What if I become so relaxed that I acquire the habit of snoring? I pray that I do not. For I am not sure what I might do if my innocent friend, startled awake in the dark of night, discovers that the thing under the bed is me.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Hedge Between

by

Charlotte Armstrong



Hank Blaustein '69

The man named Russell, who happened to be a lawyer, sat full in the light of a solitary lamp. It shone upon the brown-covered composition book in his hands. A man named John Selby, a merchant in the small city, was seated in a low chair. He hung his head; his face was hidden; the light washed only his trembling head and the nervous struggle of his fingers. The chief of police, Barker, was seated in half shadow. And Dr. Coles loomed against the wall beside a white door that was ajar. It was one o'clock in the morning.

Doctor, Lawyer, Merchant, Chief . . .

"Well?" the chief challenged. "Okay, Russell. You're smart, as Selby says you are. You come running when you're called, listen to five minutes' talk about this kid, and you predict there's got to be some such notebook around. Well? Now you've found it, why don't you see what it says?"

"I'm waiting for a direction," said the lawyer mildly. "It's not for me to turn this cover. Look at the big black letters. *Meredith Lee. Personal and Private*. It's not up to me to violate her privacy. But Selby's her kin. Coles is her doctor. And you are law and order in this town."

The doctor turned his head suddenly to the crack of the door.

"Any change?" the chief asked eagerly.

"No. She's still unconscious. Go ahead, Russell. Don't be squeamish. She's a child, after all."

"See if there's anything helpful in there," the chief of police said. "See if that notebook can explain . . ."

"Explain," the lawyer mused, "how a fifteen-year-old girl solved a seven-year-old murder mystery in four days."

"She didn't solve it all the way," said the chief impatiently.

Russell ignored him. "What do you say, Selby? She's your niece. Shall we read her private notebook?"

Selby's hands came palms up, briefly. The policeman spoke again. "Read it. I intend to, if you don't. I've got to get the straight of it. My prisoner won't talk."

The doctor said pompously, "After all, it may be best for the girl."

Russell said dryly, "I'm just as curious as the rest of you." He opened the book and began to read aloud.

Meredith Lee. New Notes and Jottings. July 23rd.

Here I am at Uncle John's. The family has dumped me for two weeks while they go to New York. I don't complain.

It is impossible for me to get bored, since I can always study human nature.

Uncle John looks much the same. Gray hairs show. He's thirty-seven. Why didn't he marry? Mama says he's practicing to stuff a shirt. He was very Uncle-ish and hearty when I got dumped last night, but he actually has no idea what to do with me, except tell the servants to keep me clean and fed. It's a good thing I've got resources.

Russell looked up. The chief was chewing his lip. The doctor was frankly smiling. John Selby said, painfully, "She's right about that. Fool I was—I *didn't* know what to do with her." His head rolled in his hands.

"Go on," the chief prodded.

Russell continued reading.

Went to the neighborhood drugstore first thing. Snooped down the street. I'd forgotten it, but my goodness, it's typical. Very settled. Not swank. Not poor, either. Very middle. No logic to that phrase. A thing can't be *very* middle, but it says what I feel. On the way home, a Discovery! There's a whopping big hedge between Uncle John's house and the house next door. The neighbor woman was out messing in her flower beds. Description: petite. Dark hair, with silver. Skillfully made up. Effect quite young. (N.B. Ooooh, what a bad paragraph! Choppy!)

So, filled with curiosity. I leaned over her gate and introduced myself. She's a Discovery! She's a Wicked Widow and she's *forbidden*! I didn't know that when I talked to her.

(N.B. Practice remembering dialogue accurately.)

Wicked Widow: Mr. Selby's niece, of course. I remember you, my dear. You were here as a little girl, weren't you? Wasn't the last time about seven years ago?

Meredith Lee: Yes, it was. But I don't remember you.

W.W.: Don't you? I am Josephine Corcoran. How old were you then, Meredith?

M.L.: Only eight.

W.W.: Only eight.

We came to a stop. *I* wasn't going to repeat. That's a horrible speech habit. You can waste hours trying to com-

municate. So I looked around and remembered something.

M.L.: I see my tree house has disintegrated.

W.W.: Your tree house? (N.B. She repeated everything I said, and with a question mark. Careless habit? Or just pace?) Oh, yes, of course. In that big maple, wasn't it?

M.L.: Mr. Jewell—you know, Uncle John's gardener?—he built it for me. I had a cot up there and a play icebox and a million cushions. I wouldn't come down.

W.W.: Wouldn't come down? Yes, I remember. Eight years old and your uncle used to let you spend the night. (N.B. She looked scared. Why? If I'd fallen out and killed myself seven years ago, I wouldn't be talking to her. Elders worry retroactively.)

M.L.: Oh, Uncle John had nothing to do with it. Mama's rational. She knew it was safe. Railings, and I always pulled up my rope ladder. Nobody could get up, or get me down without a lot of trouble. I was a tomboy in those days.

W.W.: Tomboy? Yes, seven years is a long time. (N.B. No snicker. She looked serious and thoughtful, just standing with the trowel in her hand, not even smiling. That's when I got the feeling I could really communicate and it's very unusual. She must be thirty. I get that feeling with really old people or people about eighteen, sometimes. But people in between, and especially thirty, usually act like Uncle John.)

Now I forget . . . her dialogue wasn't so sparkling, I guess, but she was understanding. Did I know any young people? I said no, and she politely hoped I wouldn't be lonely. I explained that I hoped to be a Writer, so I would probably always be lonely. And she said she supposed that was true. I liked that. It's not so often somebody listens. And while she may have looked surprised at a new thought, she didn't look *amused*. My object in life is not to *amuse*, and I get tired of those smiles. So I liked her.

But then, at dinnertime, just as soon as I'd said I'd met her, she got forbidden.

Uncle John (clearing his throat): Meredith, I don't think you had better . . . (He stuck. He sticks a lot.)

M.L.: Better what?

Uncle John: Er . . . (N.B. *English* spelling. Americans say uh. I am an American.) Uh . . . Mrs. Corcoran and I

are not . . . uh . . . especially friendly and I'd rather you didn't . . . (Stuck again)

M.L.: Why not? Are you feuding?

Uncle John: No, no. I merely . . .

M.L.: Merely what? I think she's very nice.

Uncle John: Uh . . . (very stuffy) . . . You are hardly in a position to know anything about it. I'm afraid she is not the kind of woman your mother would . . .

M.L.: What kind is she? (You have to really pry at Uncle John.)

Uncle John (finally): Not socially acceptable.

M.L.: What! Oh, for heaven's sakes, Uncle John! That's the stuffiest thing I ever heard! Why?

Uncle John: It's not stuffy, Meredith, and it's not easy to explain why. (Looks at me as if he wonders whether I understand English.) Maybe, if you knew that there was a strange business, years ago . . . Her husband was . . . uh . . . shot in rather mysterious circum—

M.L.: Shot! Do you mean killed? Do you mean *murdered*? Really? Oh, boy! How? When? Who did it? What happened?

Now, why did Uncle John act so surprised? Did he think I'd be scared? Don't people who are thirty ever remember how they didn't use to be *scared* by interesting things? But he *was* surprised and also very sticky and stuffy for a while. But I kept prying.

And I think it's just pitiful. I don't know why Uncle John can't see how pitiful it is. Poor Mrs. Corcoran. Her husband came home late one night and as he was standing at his own front door somebody shot him from behind. They found the gun but nothing else. He wasn't robbed. It's just a mystery. So, just because it is a mystery and nobody knows, they've treated her as if she were a murderess! I can just see how it's been and I'm ashamed of Uncle John. He sure is practicing to stuff a shirt. He lets the hedge grow, and he goes along with the stupid town. It sounds as if nobody has accepted her socially ever since. Fine thing! She is supposed to be a wicked widow, just because her husband got murdered by person or persons unknown. Probably the town thinks such a thing couldn't happen to a respectable person. But it could. I'm very sorry for her.

The thing I'm saving for the bottom of this page is—it's

my murder! I got that out of Uncle John. What do you know! What do you know! *I* was in my tree house that very night!

I'm just faintly remembering how I got whisked out of here so fast, that time. I never did know why. Holy cats! Eight years old. I'm asleep in a tree and a murder takes place right under me! And I never even knew it! They didn't tell me! They didn't even ask me a single question! A fine thing! A real murder in my own life, and I can't remember even one thing about it!

The lawyer paused. The doctor stirred, looked through the door. Three raised heads queried him. He said, "Nothing. It may be a good while yet before she is conscious. Don't . . . worry."

Selby turned to stare blindly at the lamp. "My sister should never—should never have left her with me. I had no business—no business to tell her a word about it."

"You thought she'd be scared away from the widow?"

"I suppose so."

The chief said, "Now, wait a minute. The girl puts down in there that she *couldn't remember even one thing* about the killing? But that makes no sense at all."

"That's the July twenty-third entry," said Russell. "Here is July twenty-fifth. Let's see."

I couldn't stand it—I just can't think about anything else but my murder. I had to find out more. This afternoon I had tea with the widow. I don't think she's wicked at all. She's very sad, actually. She was in the garden again. I just know she was conscious of me, on Uncle John's side of the hedge, all day yesterday. Today, finally, she spoke to me. So I went around and leeches onto her.

(N.B. Practice getting the "said" in.)

Nervously, she said, "I hope your uncle won't be angry."

I said, pretending to blurt, "Oh, Mrs. Corcoran, Uncle John told me about the awful thing that happened to your husband. And to think I was right up in my tree house. I can't stop thinking about it."

"Don't think about it," she said, looking pretty tense. "It was long ago, and there is no need. I'm sorry he spoke of it."

"Oh, I made him," said I. "And now when I think that

for all I know I might have seen and heard exactly what happened, and the only trouble is, I was so little, I can't remember—it just about makes me wild!"

She looked at me in a funny way. I thought she was going to blurt, "Oh, if only you could remember . . ." But actually, she said, "If you would like more cake please help yourself."

"It's too bad it's a mystery," I said (cried). "Why couldn't they solve it? Don't you wish they could solve it? Maybe it's not too late."

She looked startled. (N.B. What happens to eyes, anyhow, to make the whites show more? Observe.)

"I wish you would tell me the details," I said. "Couldn't they find out *anything*?"

"No, no. My dear, I don't think we had better talk about it at all. It's not the sort of thing a sweet child ought to be brooding about," she said.

I was desperate. "Mrs. Corcoran, the other day I thought better of you. Because you didn't laugh, for instance, when I mentioned that I used to be a tomboy, years ago. Most older people would have laughed. I'll never understand why. Obviously, I'm quite different and seven years has made a big change, and why it's so *funny* if I know that, I cannot see." She was leaning back and feeling surprised, I judged. "So don't disappoint me, now, and think of me as an eight-year-old child," I said, "when I may have the freshest eye and be the open-mindedest person around."

She nibbled her lips. She wasn't offended. I think she's very intelligent and responding.

"I'm *going* to brood and you can't stop that," I told her. "I just wish I could help. I've been thinking that maybe if I tried I *could* remember."

"Oh, no. No, my dear. Thank you," she said. "I know you would like to help. But you were only eight at that time. I don't suppose, then or now, anyone would believe you."

"And now I'm *only* fifteen," I said crossly, "and nobody will *tell* me."

She said sweetly, "You're rather an extraordinary fifteen, my dear. If I tell you about it, Meredith, and you see how hopeless it is, do you think perhaps then you can let it rest?"

I said I thought so. (What a lie!)

"Harry, my husband, was often late getting home, so that night," she said, "I wasn't at all worried. I simply went to bed, as usual, and to sleep. Something woke me. I don't know what. My window was open. It was very warm, full summer. I lay in my bed, listening. There used to be a big elm out there beside my walk. It got the disease all the elms are getting, and it had to be cut down and taken away. But that night I could see its leaf patterns on the wall, that the moon always used to make at night, and the leaves moving gently. There was a full moon, I remember. A lovely quiet summer night." (N.B. She's pretty good with a mood.)

"I had been awakened, yet I could hear nothing until I heard the shot. It paralyzed me. I lay back stiff and scared. Harry didn't cry out. I heard nothing more for a while. Then I thought I heard shrubs rustling. When I finally pulled myself to the window, your Uncle John was there." She stopped and I had to poke her up to go on.

"Your uncle was forcing his way through the hedge, which was low then. And I saw Harry lying on our little stoop. I ran to my bedroom door and my maid was standing in the hall, quite frightened, and we ran down. Your uncle told me that Harry was . . . not alive. (N.B. Pretty delicate diction.) He was calling the doctor and the police from my phone. I sat down trembling on a chair in the hall. I remember, now, that as your uncle started out of the house again, he seemed to recall where you were and went running to his garage for a ladder to get you down."

"Darn it," I said.

She knew what I meant, because she said right away, "You couldn't remember—you must have been sleepy. Perhaps you didn't really wake up."

"I suppose so," said I disgustedly. "Go on."

"Well, the police came very quickly—Chief Barker himself. And of course, Dr. Coles. They did find the gun, caught in the hedge. They never traced it. There weren't any fingerprints anywhere. And no footprints in that dry weather. So they never found out . . ." She pulled herself together. "And that, my dear, is all." She started drinking her tea, looking very severe with herself.

I said, "There never was a trial?"

"There was never anyone to try."

"Not you, Mrs. Corcoran?"

"No one accused me," she said, smiling faintly. But her eyes were so sad.

"They did, though," I said, kind of mad. "They sentenced you, too."

"Dear girl," she said very seriously, "you mustn't make a heroine of me. Chief Barker and Dr. Coles—and your Uncle John, too, I'm sure—tried as helpfully as they could to clear it all up, but they never could find out who, or even why. You see? So . . ." She was getting flustered.

"So the wind begins to blow against you," I said, mad as the dickens. "Or how come the hedge? Why does Uncle John tell me not to come here? What makes him think you're so wicked?"

"Does he?" she said. "I am not wicked, Meredith. Neither am I a saint. I'm human."

I always thought that was a corny saying. But it's effective. It makes you feel for whoever says it, as if they had admitted something just awful that you wouldn't admit, either—unless, of course, you were *trapped*.

"Harry and I were not always harmonious," she said. "Few couples are. He drank a good bit. Many men do. I suppose the neighbors noticed. Some of them, in fact, used to feel quite sorry for me." Her face was real bitter, but she has a quick hunching way of pulling herself together. "I . . . shouldn't be saying these things to you. Why do I forget you are so young? I shouldn't. Forgive me, and don't be upset."

"Not me," I told her. "I'm pretty detached. And don't forget my eye is fresh. I can see the trouble. There isn't anybody else to suspect. You need . . ."

"No, no. No more. I had no right to talk to you. And you'd better not come again. It is not I, my dear: I like you very much. I would love to see you often. But—"

I said, "I think Uncle John is a stuffy old stinker, to bend the way the wind blows. But *I* don't have to!"

"Yes, you do," she said, kind of fixing me with her eye. "It's not nice, Meredith, to be this side of the hedge. Now, please, never question your Uncle John's behavior." She was getting very upset. "You must—truly, you must—believe me . . . when I say . . . I think he meant . . . to be very kind . . . at that time." She spaced it like that, taking breaths in between.

"But that mean old hedge, for the whole town to see. It makes me mad!" I said.

She fixed me, again. She said very fast almost like whispering, "Perhaps it was I, Meredith, who let the hedge grow."

Naturally, my mouth opened, but before I got anything out she said, loudly, "It was best. There, now."

(N.B. Yep. I was really disappointed. How I hate it when people say, "There, now," implying that they know a million things more than me. And I better be comforted. I'm *not*. I'm irritated. It means they want to stop talking to me, and that's all.)

"It's all so old," she continued in that phony petting-the-kitty kind of way. "And nothing will change it. Let it rest. Thank you for coming and thank you for being open-minded. But go away now, Meredith, and promise me not to think about it any more."

I fixed her with my eye. I said, "Thank you very much for the lovely cake."

But I'm not angry. I feel too sorry for her. Besides, she let out hints enough and I should have caught on. Well, I didn't, then. But after the session I had with Uncle John . . . *are they ever dumb!*

We had finished dinner when I decided to see what more I could pry out of *him*. I said, "If Harry Corcoran was a drinking man he was probably drunk the night he got shot."

Uncle John nearly knocked his coffee over. "How do you know he was a drinking man?" roared he. "Have you been gossiping with Mrs. Jewell?" (Mrs. Jewell is the housekeeper. Vocabulary about one hundred words.)

"Oh, no, I haven't. Was he?"

"Who?"

"Harry Corcoran?"

"What?"

"Drunk?"

"So they say," bites Uncle John, cracking his teeth together, "Now, Meredith—"

"Where were you at the time of the murder?" chirped I.

(N.B. Nope. Got to learn to use the "says." They're neutral.)

"Meredith, I wish you—"

"I know what you wish, but I wish you'd tell me. Aw, come on, Uncle John. My own murder! Maybe if I had all the facts, I'd stop thinking so much about it. Don't you see that?"

(N.B. False. The more you know about anything the more interesting it gets. But he didn't notice.)

"I told you the facts," he said (muttered?), "and I wish I had kept my big mouth shut. Your mother will skin me alive. How the devil did I get into this?"

(N.B. I thought this was an improvement. He's usually so darned stuffy when he talks to me.)

"You didn't tell me any details. Please, Uncle John." I really nagged him. I don't think he's had much practice defending himself, because finally, stuffy as anything, he talked.

"Very well. I'll tell you the details as far as I know them. Then I shall expect to hear no more about it."

"I know," said I. True. I knew what he *expected*. I didn't really promise anything. But he's not very analytical. "Okay. Pretend you're on the witness stand. Where were you at the time?"

"I was, as it happened . . . (N.B. Stuffy! Phrase adds nothing. Of course it happened.) . . . in the library that night working late on some accounts. It was nearly one in the morning, I believe . . . (N.B. Of course he believes, or he wouldn't say so) . . . when I heard Harry Corcoran whistling as he walked by in the street."

"What tune?"

"What?" (I started to repeat but he didn't need it. Lots of people make you repeat a question they heard quite well just so they can take a minute to figure out the answer.) "Oh, that 'Danny Boy' song. Favorite of his. That's how I knew who it was. He was coming along from the end of town, past this house—"

"Was that usual?"

"It was neither usual nor unusual," said Uncle John crossly. "It's merely a detail."

"Okay. Go on."

"The next thing I noticed was the shot."

"You were paralyzed?"

"What?" He just about glared at me. "Yes, momentarily. Then I ran out my side door and pushed through the hedge

and found him on his own doorstep . . . uh . . . ”

“Not living,” I said delicately.

He gave me another nasty look. “Now, that’s all there was to it.”

“That’s not all! What did you do then? Didn’t you even look for the murderer?”

“I saw nobody around. I realized there might be somebody concealed, of course. So I picked up his key from where it had fallen on the stoop—”

“The Corcorans’ door was locked?”

“It was locked and I unlocked it and went inside to the phone. As I was phoning, Mrs. Corcoran and her maid came downstairs. I called Chief Barker and Dr. Coles.”

“Yes, I know. And then you ran to get the ladder and pulled me down out of my tree. Okay. But you’re leaving things out, Uncle John. You are deliberately being barren. You don’t give any atmosphere at all. What was Mrs. Corcoran’s emotional state?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” said Uncle John with his nose in a sniffing position, “and if I had, it would not be a fact.”

I pounced. “You think she did it?”

He pulled his chin practically to the back of his neck. “I wish you would not say that. I have little right to speculate and none to make a judgment. There was no evidence.”

“But you did pass judgment. You told me she was a certain kind of—”

“Meredith, I know only one fact. Your mother would not like this at all. In any case, I will not discuss Mrs. Corcoran’s character with you. I must insist you take my word for it. There is no way . . . ” He kind of held his forehead.

“Uncle John, who let the hedge grow?”

“What? The hedge belongs to me.”

“That ain’t the way I heered it,” said stupid I.

So *he* pounced. “Where have you been hearing things? Who told you Harry Corcoran was a drinking man? Where have you been, Meredith?”

So I confessed. No use writing down the blasting I got. It was the usual. Bunch of stuff about my elders wanting no harm to come to me, things not understood in my philosophy, mysterious evils that I wot not of, and all that sort

of stuff. Why doesn't he tell me plain out that it's none of my business?

Well, I don't think it's evil. I think it's foolishness. I think what Uncle John's too sticky and stuffy to tell me . . . (probably thinks I never heard of s-blank-x) . . . is that he used to be romantic about the pretty lady next door. Probably Uncle John saw a lot of Harry's drunken comings-home and heard plenty of the disharmonizing. Probably he is one neighbor who felt sorry for her. Wonder if they were in love and said so. I doubt it. Probably they just cast glances at each other over the hedge and said nothing. That would be just like Uncle John.

Anyhow, when somebody shoots Harry Corcoran in the back, the widow gets it into her head that Uncle John did it. After all, she heard things—rustling bushes—looked out, and there he was. But gosh, even if she felt romantic about him too, she'd draw the line at murder! But of course, Uncle John didn't do it. He thinks *she* did. He knows she was unhappy with Harry. But he draws the line at murder, too. So, these dopes, what do they do? They have no "right" to pass "judgment" or "accuse" anybody. They pull themselves in, with the hedge between. All these years, with their very own suspicions proving that neither one could have done it. . . . Probably if they'd had sense enough to speak out and have a big argument, they could have got married and been happy long ago.

Oh, how ridiculous! How pitiful! And oh, that I was born to put it right! (N.B. Who said that?)

The lawyer put the book down. John Selby groaned. "I had no idea . . . no idea what she had in her head. I knew she was bright . . ."

"Bright, yes," said Dr. Coles, "but that kid's so insufferably condescending!"

"You wouldn't like it even if she guessed right," said Russell thoughtfully. "The girl's got a hard way to go. She'll be lonely."

"Thought she was smart, all right," growled Barker. "Wasn't as smart as she thought she was. She was wrong. I take it?"

Selby didn't answer. His gaze was fixed on the lawyer's face.

"You shouldn't blame her for being wrong," Russell murmured. "She's not yet equipped to understand a lot of things. But she is compelled to try. There's her intelligent curiosity fighting a way

past some clichés, but the phrase 'feel romantic' is flat, for her, and without shading."

"I still can't see what happened," Barker broke in to complain. "Never mind the shading. Go ahead—if there's more of it."

"Yes, there's more. We come to July twenty-sixth—yesterday." Russell began to read once more.

I've figured. I know exactly how to do it. I'll say *I can remember!* I'll tell them that when I was up in my tree that night the shot or something woke me, and I saw a stranger running away . . .

"So she made it up! Told a story!" Chief Barker slapped his thigh. "But . . . now wait a minute . . . you believed her, Selby?"

"I believed her," her uncle sighed.

"Go on. Go on," the doctor said.

I know how to make them believe me, too. This will be neat! I'll tell Uncle John first, and I'll mix into the story I tell him all the little bits I got from her that he doesn't know I've been told. So, since *they'll* be true, he'll be fooled, and think I really remember. Then I'll go to her, but in the story I tell her, all I have to do is mix in the bits I got from Uncle John that she doesn't know I've been told. It'll work! Ha, they'll never catch onto the trick of it. They'll believe me! Then they can get together, if they still want to. I'm not worried about telling a kind of lie about it. If anybody official starts asking questions, I can always shudder, and be too young and tender, and clam up.

Get it exactly right: Make lists.

Russell looked up. "Meredith's good at math, I suppose?"

"A-plus," her uncle groaned. "She scares me."

Russell nodded and began to read again.

List No. 1. For Uncle John. Things she told me.

1. Warm night. Full moon.
2. The elm tree that used to be there.
3. The gun was found *in the hedge*.
4. Harry didn't yell.

Now, put all these points in. Future dialogue.

* * *

Futurè dialogue.

By Meredith Lee.

M.L.: Oh, Uncle John, I do remember now!

Uncle John: What?

(Whoops! Since this is in the future, I better not write *his* dialogue. It might confuse me.)

M.L.: I was up in my room, thinking, and I began to hum that tune. That "Danny Boy." It made the whole thing come back to me like a dream. Now I remember waking up on my cot and hearing that whistling. I peeked out between my railings. The moon was very bright that night. It was warm, too, real summer. I could see the elm tree by the Corcorans' walk. (Pause. Bewildered.) Which elm tree, Uncle John? There's none there now. *Was* there an elm tree, seven years ago?

(Ha, ha, that'll *do* it!)

I saw a man come up their walk. I must have heard the shot. I thought somebody had a firecracker left over from Fourth of July. I saw the man fall down but he didn't make any noise, so I didn't think he was hurt. I thought he fell asleep.

(What a touch! Whee!)

Then I saw there was another man down there, and he threw something into the hedge. The hedge crackled where it landed. Then this man jumped through their gate and ran, and then you came out of this house . . .

(By this time the stuffing should be coming out of Uncle John.)

I'll say I don't know who the stranger was. "But it wasn't you, Uncle John," I'll say, "and the widow Corcoran's been thinking so for seven years and I'm going to tell her . . ."

Then I'll run out of the house as fast as I can.

He'll follow—he'll absolutely have to!

Russell looked up. "Was it anything like that?"

"It was almost exactly like that," said John Selby, lifting his tired, anxious face. "And I did follow. She was right about that. I absolutely had to."

"Smart," said Chief Barker, smacking his lips, "the way she worked that out."

"Too smart," the doctor said, and then, "Nurse? Yes?" He went quickly through the door.

"My sister will skin me alive," said John Selby, rousing himself. "Kid's had me jumping through hoops. Who am I to deal with the likes of her? Looks at me with those big brown eyes. Can't tell whether you're talking to a baby or a woman. Everything I did was a mistake. I never had the least idea what she was thinking. You're smart about people, Russell—that's why I need you. I feel as if I'd been through a wind tunnel. Help me with Meredith. I feel terrible about the whole thing, and if she's seriously hurt and I'm responsible . . ."

"You say you don't understand young people," began Russell, "but even if you did, this young person . . ."

"You take it too hard, John," said Chief Barker impatiently. "Doc doesn't think she's hurt too seriously. And she got herself into it, after all. Listen, go on. What did she say to the widow? That's what I need to know. Is it in there?"

"It must be," said Russell. "She made another list."

List No. 2. For the widow. Things Uncle John told me.

1. Harry was whistling "Danny Boy."
2. He came in the direction that passed this house.
3. He was drunk.
4. He dropped his key.

Not so good. Yes it is, too. What woke her? She doesn't know, but I do! Future dialogue:

M.L.: Oh, Mrs. Corcoran, I think I'm beginning to remember! I really think so! Listen, I think I heard a man whistling. And it was that song about Danny Boy. And he was walking from the east, past our house. Would it have been your husband?

(Ha! She's going to *have* to say yes!)

And he . . . it seems to me that he didn't walk right. He wobbled. He wobbled up your walk and he dropped something. Maybe a key. It must have been a key because I saw him bending over to hunt for it, but . . .

(Artistic pause here? I think so.)

Oh, now I remember! He straightened up. He couldn't have found it because he called out something. It was a name! It must have been . . . Oh, Mrs. Corcoran, could it have been your name, being called in the night, that woke you up?

(Betcha! Betcha!)

Well, the rest of hers goes on the same. Stranger, throws gun, runs away, just as Uncle John comes out: "So it wasn't you," I'll say, "and I can prove it! But poor Uncle John has been afraid it *was*."

Then what? I guess maybe I'd better start to bawl.

Yep. I think that will do it. I think that's pretty good. They're bound to believe me. Of course, the two stories are not identical, but they can't be. *They'll* never notice the trick of it. They'll just have to be convinced that it wasn't either one of them who shot Harry Corcoran. I can't wait to see what will happen. What will they *do*? What will they *say*? Oh-ho-ho, is this ever research! I better cry soft enough so I can hear and memorize.

When shall I try it? I can't wait! Now is a good time. Uncle John is in the library and she's home. I can see a light upstairs in her house. Here goes, then.

(N.B. Would I rather be an actress? Consider this. M.L.)

The lawyer closed the book. "That's all." He put his hand to his eyes but his mouth was curving tenderly.

"Some scheme," said Barker in awe. "Went to a lot of trouble to work up all that plot . . ."

"She had a powerful motive," Russell murmured.

"My romance," said Selby bitterly.

"Oh, no. Research for her." The lawyer grinned.

"Whatever the motive, this remarkable kid went and faked those stories and she had it wrong," growled Barker. "But she must have got something right. Do you realize that?" He leaned into the light. "Selby, as far as you were concerned, you believed that rigmarole of hers. You thought she *did* remember the night of the killing and she *had* seen a stranger?"

"I did," John Selby said, sounding calmer. "I was considerably shaken. I had always suspected Josephine Corcoran, for reasons of my own."

"Lots of us suspected," the chief said dryly, "for various reasons. But never could figure how she managed, with you rushing out to the scene so fast and the maid in the upstairs hall."

"What were your reasons, John?" Russell asked.

"In particular, there was a certain oblique conversation that took place in the course of a flirtation that appalls me, now. It seemed to me, one evening, that she was thinking that the death of her husband might be desirable—and might be arranged. I can't quote

her exactly, you understand, but the hint was there. She thought him stupid and cruel and intolerable, and the hint was that if he were dead and gone she'd be *clean*. The shallow, callous, self-righteous . . . the *idea*! As if her life should rightfully be cleared of him with no more compunction than if he'd been—well, a wart on her hand." He held his head again. "Now, how is a man going to explain to his fifteen-year-old niece just what makes him think a woman is wicked? The feeling you get that emanates from the brain and body?" He groaned. "That little talk pulled me out of my folly, believe me. That's when I shied off and began to let the hedge grow. When you realize that not long after that he *did* die, you'll see how I've lived with the memory of that conversation for seven years. Wondering. Was I right about what she had in mind and did I perhaps not recoil enough? Had I not sufficiently discouraged the—the idea? There was no evidence. There was nothing. But I've had a burden close to guilt and I've stayed on my side of the hedge, believe me, and begun to study to stuff a shirt." He groaned again and shifted in the chair. "When I thought the child had really seen a stranger with that gun, I was stunned. As soon as I realized where Meredith had gone—"

"You followed. You saw them through the widow's front door?" The chief was reassembling this testimony.

"Yes. I could see them. At the top of the stairs. Mrs. Corcoran standing by the newel post and Meredith talking earnestly to her."

"You couldn't hear?"

"No, unfortunately. But if Meredith had rehearsed it, if she stuck to her script, then we must have it here."

"If it's there, I don't get it." Chief Barker passed his hand over his face. "Now, suddenly, you say—in the middle of the girl's story—the widow yelled something that you *could* hear?"

"She yelled, *I told you to keep out of this, you nosy brat!*" And then she pushed Meredith violently enough to send her rolling down the stairs." Selby began to breathe heavily.

"And you got through the door—"

"By the time I got through the door, she was on the girl like a wildcat. She was frantic. She *meant* to hurt her." John Selby glared.

"So you plucked the widow off her prey and called us for help? Did Mrs. Corcoran try to explain at all?" Russell inquired.

"She put out hysterical cries. 'Poor dear! Poor darling!' But she meant to hurt Meredith. I heard. I saw. I know. And she knows that I know."

"Yes, the widow gave herself away," said Russell. "She was wicked, all right."

"So we've got her," the chief growled, "for the assault on Meredith. Also, we know darned well she shot her husband seven years ago. But she won't talk. What I need," the chief was anxious, "is to figure out what it was that set her off. What did the kid say that made her nerve crack? I can't see it. I just don't get it."

The doctor had been standing quietly in the door. Now he said, "Maybe Meredith can tell us. She's all right. Almost as good as new, I'd say."

John Selby was on his feet. So was Chief Barker. "Selby, you go first," the doctor advised. "No questions for the first minute or two."

The chief turned and sighed. "Beats me."

Russell said, "One thing, Harry Corcoran never called out his wife's name in the night. Selby, who heard a whistle, would have heard such a cry."

"Do I see what you're getting at?" said Barker shrewdly. "It shows the kid didn't get *that far* in the story or the widow would have known she was story-telling."

"She certainly didn't get as far as any guilty stranger, or the widow would have been delighted. Let's see."

"There was something. . . ."

"Was it the tune? No, that's been known. Selby told that long ago. Was it Harry's drunkenness? No, because medical evidence exists. Couldn't be that."

"For the Lord's sakes, let's *ask* her," the chief said.

They went through the door. The nurse had effaced herself watchfully. Four men stood around the bed. Doctor, Lawyer, Merchant, Chief . . .

Young Meredith Lee looked very small, lying against the pillow with her brown hair pressed back by the bandages, her freckles sharpened by the pallor of her face, her big brown eyes round and shocked.

"How do you feel, honey?" rumbled the chief.

"She pushed me down." Meredith's voice was a childish whimper.

Her Uncle John patted the bed and said compulsively, "There, Meredith. There now . . ."

"Don't say that," the chief put in with a chuckle. "It just annoys her."

The girl saw her notebook in Russell's hands. She winced and

for a flash her eyes narrowed and something behind the child face was busy reassessing the situation.

"Miss Lee," said the lawyer pleasantly, "my name is Russell. I'm a friend of your Uncle John's. I'm the one who ferreted out your notes. I hope you'll forgive us for reading them. Thanks to you, now we know how wicked the widow was seven years ago."

"I only pretended," said Meredith in a thin treble. "I was only eight. I don't really remember anything at all." She shrank in the bed, very young and tender.

Her uncle said, "We know how you pretended. I—I had no idea you were so smart."

"That was some stunt," the doctor said.

"Very clever," the lawyer said, "the two stories as you worked them out."

"You're quite a story-teller, honey," chimed in Chief Barker.

On the little girl's face something struggled and lost. Meredith gave them one wild indignant look of pure outraged intelligence before her face crumpled completely. "I am not either!" she bawled. "I'm not any good! I got it all wrong! Didn't get the plot right. Didn't get the characters right. I guess I don't know *anything*! I guess I might as well give up . . ." She flung herself over and sobbed bitterly.

Chief Barker said, "She's okay, isn't she? She's not in pain?"

The nurse rustled, muttering "Shock." The doctor said stiffly, "Come now, Meredith. This isn't a bit good for you."

But Selby said, to the rest of them, "See? That's the way it goes. She's eight and she's eighty. She can cook up a complex stunt like that and then bawl like a baby. I give up! I don't know what you should do with her. I've wired my sister. She'll skin us both, no doubt. Meredith, *please* . . ."

Meredith continued to howl.

The lawyer said sharply, "That's right, Meredith. You may as well give up trying to be a writer if you are going to cry over your first mistakes instead of trying to learn from them. Will you be grown up for a minute and listen? We seriously want your help to convict a murderess."

"You do not," wailed Meredith. "I'm too stupid!"

"Don't be a hypocrite," snapped the lawyer. "You are not stupid. As a matter of fact, you are extremely stuffy—as this book proves to us."

Meredith choked on a sob. Then slowly she opened one brown eye.

"The average young person," hammered the lawyer, "has little or no respect for an elder's experience and nothing can make him see its value until he gets some himself. But even a *beginning* writer should have a less conventional point of view."

"Now wait a minute," bristled John Selby. "Don't scold her. She's had an awful time. Listen, she meant well . . ."

Meredith sat up and mopped her cheek with the sheet. The brown eyes withered him. "Pul-lease, Uncle John," said Meredith Lee.

So John Selby raised his head and settled his shoulders. "Okay." He forced a grin. "Maybe I'm not too old to learn. You want me to lay it on the line? All right, you *didn't* mean well. You were perfectly vain and selfish. You were going to fix up my life and Josephine Corcoran's life as a little exercise for your superior wisdom." His stern voice faltered. "Is that better?"

Meredith said, tartly, "At least it's rational." She looked around and her voice was not a baby's. "You are all positive the widow is a murderess," she said flatly.

Chief Barker said, "Well, honey, we always did kind of think so."

"Don't talk down to her," snapped John Selby, "or she'll talk down to you. I—I get that much."

"Who are you, anyhow?" asked Meredith of the chief.

He told her. "And I am here to get to the bottom of a crime. Now, young lady," the chief was no longer speaking with any jovial look at all, "you jumped to a wrong conclusion, you know. She *was* guilty."

"I don't see *why* you've always thought so," said Meredith rebelliously.

"I guess you don't," said Barker. "Because it's a matter of experience. Of a lot of things. In the first place, I know what my routine investigation can or cannot turn up. When it turns up *no* sign of any stranger whatsoever, I tend to believe that there wasn't one."

The chief's jaw was thrust forward. The little girl did not wince. She listened gravely.

"In the second place, as you noticed yourself, there's nobody else around here to suspect. In the third place, nine times out of ten, only a wife is close enough to a man to have a strong enough motive."

"Nine times out of ten," said Meredith scornfully.

"That's experience," said Barker, "and you scoff at the nine times because you think we forget that there can be a tenth time. You are wrong, young lady. Now, somebody shot Harry Corcoran—"

"Why don't you suspect Uncle John?" flashed Meredith.

"No motive," snapped Barker.

"Meredith," began her uncle, "I'm afraid you—"

"Speak up," said Russell.

"Yes. Right." Selby straightened again. "Well, then, listen. I'd no more murder a man as a favor to a neighbor than I'd jump over the moon. Your whole idea—that Josephine Corcoran would *think* I had—is ridiculous. Whatever she is, she's too mature for that. Furthermore, I never did want to marry her. And your mother may skin me for this but so help me you'd better know, men sometimes don't and women know it." Meredith blinked. "Also, even if I had," roared her Uncle John, "Barker knows it might occur to me that there is such a thing as divorce. Just as good a way to get rid of a husband, and a lot safer than murder."

Meredith's tongue came out and licked her lip.

"Now, as to her motive, she hated Harry Corcoran bitterly—bitterly. She's . . . well, she's wicked. To know that is—is a matter of experience. You spot it. Some cold and selfish, yet hot and reckless thing. That's the best I can do."

"It's not bad," said Meredith humbly, "I mean, thank you, Uncle John. Where is she now?"

"In the hospital," said Chief Barker, "with my men keeping their eye on her."

"Was she hurt?"

The doctor cleared his throat. "She's being hysterical. That is, you see, she was startled into making a terrible mistake when she pushed you, my dear. Now, all she can think to do is fake a physical or psychic collapse. But it's strictly a phony. I can't tell you exactly how I know that—"

"I suppose it's experience," said Meredith solemnly. She seemed to retreat deeper into the pillow. "I was all wrong about her. The town was *right*!" She looked as if she might cry, having been forced to this concession.

Russell said briskly, "That's not enough. No good simply saying you were wrong. You need to understand what happened to you, just how you were led."

"Led?" said Meredith distastefully.

"The widow was guilty," Russell said. "Begin with that. Now look back at the time you first hung over her gate. You couldn't know she was guilty or even suspect it, because you hadn't so much as heard about the murder yet. How could you guess the fright she got, remembering that little girl in the tree? You thought it was

retroactive worry—that you might have fallen. Because that is a kind of fear in your experience. Do you see, now, when you turned up, so full of vigor and intelligence, that she never felt less like smiling in her life? *Of course* she took you seriously. And you were charmed.”

“Naturally,” said Meredith bravely.

“I can see, and now you should be able to see, how she tried to use your impulsive sympathy. Maybe she hoped that when you tried—as you were bound to try—to remember the night, long ago, that your imagination would be biased in her favor.”

“I guess it was,” said Meredith bleakly.

“Probably she tried to put suspicion of your Uncle John into your head, not from innocence, but to supply a missing suspect to the keen and much-too-brainy curiosity that had her terrified. Now, don’t be downcast,” the lawyer added, his warm smile breaking. “I’d have been fooled, too. After all, this is hindsight.”

“Probably you wouldn’t have been fooled,” said Meredith stolidly. “Experience, huh?”

“I’ve met a few murderers before,” said Russell gently.

“Well, I’ve met a murderess now,” said Meredith gravely. “Boy, was I ever dumb!” She sighed.

The chief said, “All clear? Okay. Now, what do you say we find out where you were *smart*? What *did* it? Can’t we get to that?”

“Smart?” said Meredith.

“This is our question to you, young lady. What cracked Mrs. Corcoran’s nerve? Where were you in that story when she flew at you and pushed you down the stairs?”

The girl was motionless.

“You see, dear?” began the doctor.

“She sees,” said her Uncle John ferociously.

Meredith gave him a grateful lick of the eye. “Well, I was just past the key . . .” she said. She frowned. “And *then* she yelled and pushed me.” The brown eyes turned, bewildered.

“What were the exact words?” said Barker briskly. “Russell, read that part again.”

But Russell repeated, lingeringly, “Just past the key . . . ?”

“I don’t get it,” Barker said. “Do you?”

“I just thought she’d be glad,” said Meredith in a small groan. “But she pushed me and hurt me. I got it *wrong*.” She seemed to cower. She was watching Russell.

“You got it right,” said he. “Listen. And follow me. Harry Corcoran was shot in the back.”

"That's right," the chief said.

"The key was on the doorstep." The lawyer was talking to the girl.

"I picked it up," said Selby.

"All this time we've been assuming that he dropped the key *because he was shot*. But that isn't what you said, Meredith. You said that he dropped the key *because he was drunk*. Now, all this time we have assumed that he was shot from behind, from somewhere near the hedge. But if you got it right, when he bent over to pick up the key . . . and was shot in the back . . ." Russell waited. He didn't have to wait long.

"*She* shot him from above," said Meredith, quick as a rabbit. "*She* was upstairs."

"From *above*," said Barker, sagging. "And the widow's been waiting for seven years for some bright brain around here to think of that. Yep. Shot from a screenless window. Threw the gun out, closed the window, opened her door, faced her maid. Pretty cool. Pretty lucky. Pretty smart. And there is nothing you could call evidence, even yet." But the chief was not discouraged or dismayed. He patted the bed covers. "Don't you worry, honey. You got her, all right. And I've made out with less. By golly, I got her method, now, and that's going to be leverage. And, by golly, one thing she's going to have to tell me, and that is *why* she pushed you down the stairs."

"She needn't have," said Meredith, in the same thin, woeful voice, "*I* didn't know . . . *I* didn't understand." Then her face changed and something was clicking in her little head. "But she still *thinks* I saw him drop the key. Couldn't I go where she is? Couldn't I . . . break her down? I could act." The voice trailed off. They weren't going to let her go, the four grown men.

"*I'm* going," said Selby grimly. "I'll break her down."

"Stay in bed," said the doctor, at the same time. "Nurse will be here. I may be needed with the widow."

"And I," said Russell. But still he didn't move. "Miss Lee," he said to the little girl, "may I make a prophecy? You'll go on studying the whole world, you'll get experience, and acquire insight, and you will not give up until you become a writer." He saw the brown eyes clear; the misting threat dried away. He laid the notebook on the covers. "You won't need to be there," he said gently, "because you can imagine." He held out a pencil. "Maybe you'd like to be working on an ending?" She was biting her left thumb but her right hand twitched as she took the pencil.

"Meredith," said her Uncle John, "here's one thing you can put in. You sure took the stuffing out of me. And I don't care what your mother's going to say . . ."

Meredith said, as if she were in a trance, "When is Mama coming?"

"In the morning. I wish I hadn't wired—I wish I hadn't alarmed her . . . We're going to be in for it."

"Oh, I don't know, Uncle John," said Meredith. The face was elfin now, for a mocking second of time. Then it was sober. She put the pencil into her mouth and stared at the wall. The nurse moved closer. The four men cleared their throats. Nothing happened. Meredith was gone, imagining. Soon the four grown men tiptoed away.

Meredith Lee. New Notes and Jottings, July 27th.

Early to bed. Supposed to be worn out. False, but convenient for all of us.

Everybody helped manage Mama. Dr. Coles put a small pink bandage on me. Chief Barker and Mr. Russell met her train and said gloating things about the widow confessing.

But, of course, Mama had to blast us some. She was just starting to rend Uncle John when I said, "Don't be so cross with him, Mama. He is the Hero. Saved my life." That took her aback. She was about to start on me, but Uncle John jumped in. "Meredith's the Heroine, sis. She broke the case."

Well, Mama got distracted. She forgot to be mad at us any more. "What's going on with you two?" she wanted to know. Well, I guess she could see that the stuffing was out of both of us.

(N.B. Men are interesting. M.L.)

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Carol Harper



Illustration by Patricia Ostad

Charlotte MacLeod brings back agriculture professor Peter Shandy in **Vane Pursuit** (Mysterious Press, \$15.95, 185 pp). Helen, Peter's wife, is writing a paper about Praxiteles Lumpkin and his unique weathervane art. Someone else is stealing the vanes, burning down the buildings to which they were attached to cover the thefts, and killing people along the way. Helen and Peter investigate in this humorous addition to MacLeod's Balacava College series.

If you like books that deal with different cultures, you'll like the next one: Gary Alexander's **Unfunny Money** (Walker, \$17.95, 172 pp), based on the short story "Kiet and the Inflationary Gap" which appeared in AHMM in July, 1987. In it, Superintendent Bamsan Kiet, chief of police in the fictional Southeast Asian country of Luong, comes back from helping a cousin plant rice (he has a sore back to prove it) to find that the streets of Hickorn are being paved with counterfeit *zin*. He can't even afford to buy dinner, since the funny money is creating a major inflation problem. Kiet has to deal with the government's pressure on him to solve this case as well as a particularly brutal murder and deal with the irritating religious cult panhandling at the airport. His assistant wants to use up to date techniques he learned in the U.S., even if the equipment doesn't exist in Luong. Also a humorous read, with lots of atmosphere.

Jesse Sublett, former rock musician and resident of Austin, Texas, has written **Rock Critic Murders** (Viking, \$16.95, 226 pp), which stars bassist Martin Fender as the detective. Drugs, the theft of a pest control company's insect-shaped sign, the murder of a rock critic, and the apparent suicide of a friend occupy Fender in this musically-oriented mystery. Set in Austin, the book presents a picture of the musical underworld of that college town, and blends it with the mystery and the characterization of the detective and his old rock band quite well.

Are you a professional wrestling aficionado? If so, read **Last Dance in Redondo Beach** by Michael J. Katz (Putnam, \$17.95, 255 pp). Television sports reporter Andy Sussman finds himself unwillingly assigned to host a "Network Battle of the Stars," and during a raft race, Doctor Double X, a professional wrestler, dies. Now Andy is stuck with investigating the death, even though he feels that being associated with wrestling will ruin his sportscaster image. Characterization of the wrestlers both in and out of the ring is wonderfully funny. So is the description of behind-the-scenes network politics.

Bill Crider has brought back Sheriff Dan Rhodes in his Blacklin County, Texas, series. In **Death on the Move** (Walker, \$17.95, 193 pp), someone is stripping all the furnishings from the vacant vacation homes around the lake, someone (else?) is robbing corpses of valuables while they (the corpses) are being prepared for viewing in the funeral home, and a horribly trussed-up body is found in a vacant house. Meanwhile, Dan lives on peanut butter, ketchup, and other terrible-sounding bachelor concoctions while courting his ladyfriend, Ivy Daniel. Good sense of place with just enough humor inserted. But I can't see how Dan will survive malnutrition if he doesn't propose to Ivy soon. Warning: the description of the corpse is a bit too graphic for some tastes.

Charlie Gamble lives on board the *Squareknot*, a sailing vessel so well built that he can sail it alone, although he would prefer to have Rosy Marlette still on board. But Rosy, whom he met in *Stray Cat*, has left him without even a note, and Charlie finds himself a little "at sea." So he and his friends Lew and Lucy, aboard their boat, the *Lew-Sea*, take off from Boston to Florida. Along the way, they are harassed by a vicious Coast Guard captain, and Charlie decides to get revenge in his own way. His revenge results in his conning his way into possession of a boatyard, and Lew and Lucy help. This con gets him back to Long Island where Rosy used to

live, and both Rosy and his past come back to haunt him when she gets involved in attempted art forgery, murder, and blackmail. **Ninth Life**, by Don Matheson (Summit, \$17.95, 236 pp) is the second in what looks to be a promising series. If you like books with a caper theme, this one is highly recommended.

Frank Clemons, the Atlanta cop who starred in Thomas H. Cook's *Sacrificial Ground*, returns as a private eye in New York in **Flesh and Blood** (Putnam, \$17.95, 302 pp). He has followed Karen, the sister of the victim in *Sacrificial Ground*, to New York and, while he associates with Karen and her high-class friends, he has set up a sleazy office in Hell's Kitchen. At a party hosted by Karen, he meets Imalia Covallo, a very stylish, expensive designer. Imalia wants to hire Frank—one of her employees, Hannah Karlsberg, has been murdered, and the police will only release the body to a relative. Imalia wants Frank to find a relative so that Hannah can be buried. A simple enough assignment, until it embroils Frank in the investigation of the murder, an investigation of the sweatshops of the 1930's, and an involvement in modern-day garment district intrigues. Along the way, Frank meets Farouk, the husband of the owner of the after-hours bar he frequents most often, and Farouk turns out to be an excellent assistant—he knows his way around the paper chase, a part of investigation with which Frank has never felt comfortable. Both Frank and Farouk are interesting characters and the substance of the story, rooted in the formation of the garment workers' union, is extremely informative as well as well-written.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



Although Ridley Scott's **Black Rain** features Oscar winner Michael Douglas, up-and-comer Andy Garcia, lovely Kate Capshaw, and a pair of leading Japanese actors, the stars of this bi-national police drama are the settings in which it takes place.

The trans-Pacific chase of a brutal young Japanese gangster by a pair of New York's finest begins in the Big Apple's gritty downtown meat packing district, through warehouses filled with rows of blood-dripping carcasses. It continues in a post-modern, surreal Osaka, whose garishly lit nightclub district makes Times Square look like a dim bulb. It ends in the early morning mist of a traditional Japanese farm.

Detective Nick Conklin (Michael Douglas), an unorthodox, rough and tumble cop under investigation for taking money from a drug bust, and his above

reproach, on-the-way-up partner Charlie Vincent first run into their prey during a lunch break, when a nattily attired young Japanese man and a couple of henchmen burst in, guns held high. The leader of this pack rubs out a pair from the Mafia and its Japanese counterpart, the Yakuza, huddled together for a business meeting.

After Conklin collars the killer, he's told the State Department has agreed to a Japanese request to send him back to Japan where he is wanted for other crimes. This, it turns out, is no two-bit hired gun. The object of everyone's attention is Sato (Yusaku Matsuda), a vicious young turk trying to kill and terrorize his way into the hierarchy of the Japanese mob.

Despite the suspicions of Internal Affairs as to Conklin's honesty, he and his partner Vincent are assigned to take

Sato to Japan. Predictably, they mess up this relatively simple job when, after a long flight, they unwittingly turn their prisoner over to Sato's cohorts, disguised as police.

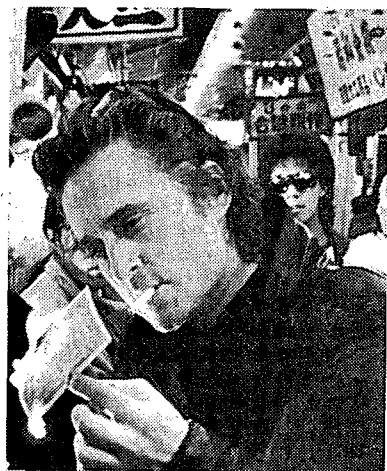
Conklin's attempt to track down Sato is the main thrust of *Black Rain*, but there is a subplot in which Sato and the mobsters are involved in a currency counterfeiting war. Although Conklin and Sato are on opposite sides, they are, in a sense, similar. The New York cop bucks the system, he's a loner, an individual, totally out of place in rigid Japanese society. The would-be Osaka crime boss shows no respect for the elderly crime lords. He also does what he wants.

The stereotypical ugly American run amok overseas,

Conklin contrasts with his handsome and well-behaved American partner, Charlie, and the controlled, polite Japanese police inspector assigned to watch over them, Masahiro Matsumoto. Conklin is gruff, headstrong, and a one-man police force. This character is at times even reminiscent of Michael Douglas's cartoonish role of an American in foreign lands in the box-office bonanzas *Romancing the Stone* and *Jewel of the Nile*.

Japanese film veteran Ken Takakura, as Inspector Matsumoto (Mas to the Americans, who must nickname everyone), is delightful as a man who knows his place in society and does not deviate from what's expected of him until late in the action when even he adopts the attitude of his rambunctious American visitor. Andy Garcia, a handsome young actor first seen in *The Untouchables*, is a good, good cop to Douglas's bad cop act. Kate Capshaw, as an expatriate chief hostess in a Japanese club, is little more than window dressing in her throwaway role.

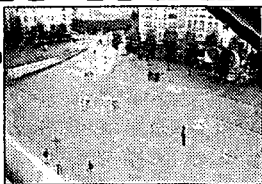
As far as suspense goes, *Black Rain* is a bit dry. The plot is straightforward and predictable. But there is plenty of action and most notable of all, a dark, seamy mood which effectively permeates the entire picture.



Michael Douglas in *Black Rain*

THE STORY THAT WON

The September Mysterious won by Lane Olinghouse of orable mentions go to Don fornia; Byron R. Carpenter Michele of Austin, Texas; lin, Pennsylvania; Wanda Vasey of La Barge, Wyoming; Mary McNeal of Jefferson, Maryland; S. Lee Pool of Henderson, Texas; Deborah L. Filipek of Mt. Prospect, Illinois; Traci Schuyler of Paso Robles, California; Melissa Conrad of Warminster, Pennsylvania; and Virginia Thompson of Alameda, California.



Photograph contest was Everett, Washington. Hon-Shaffer of Belmont, Cali-of Bountiful, Utah; Julie Peter M. Winkler of Frank-

A SUPERFLUITY OF SPIES OR IT HAD TO HAPPEN SOONER OR LATER by Lane Olinghouse

"Aunt Bessie sends her love."

"It's ten o'clock. You should replace the battery."

"Did you see the woman in the red dress?"

"No, it looks like rain all day to me."

"The garage will have the car ready Friday."

"But I need until Tuesday to complete my analysis on it."

"Harold will meet you tonight at the club."

"No, I don't. I never even heard the numbers announced."

"Do you think we'll see the sun today?"

"Yes. Did you see the man with her?"

"Do you have the correct time? My digital's dead."

"I'm glad to hear she's up and about again."

"Your report is due Monday."

"Good. I hope they remember to check the timing."

"Do you know if anyone won the lottery?"

"And what time did Harold say he'd be there?"

"Did you steal the documents as ordered?"

"Yes, of course. They're here in my briefcase."

CLASSIFIED

MARKET

AH-JANUARY/90

ALFRED HITCHCOCK—published 13 times a year. CLASSIFIED AD rate is \$2.60 per word—payable in advance—(\$39.00 minimum). Capitalized words 40¢ per word additional.

AUTHOR'S SERVICE

PUBLISH YOUR BOOK! Join our successful authors. Publicity, advertising, beautiful books. All subjects invited. Send for fact-filled booklet and free manuscript report. Carlton Press, Dept. SMA, 11 West 32 Street, New York 10001.

LOOKING for a publisher? Learn how you can have your book published, promoted, distributed. Send for free booklet. HP-5, Vantage Press, 516 W. 34th St., New York, NY 10001.

AUTOMOBILES & MIDGET CARS

IS it true . . . Jeeps For \$44 Through The Government? Call For Facts! 1-312-742-1142 Ext. 4674.

BOOKS & PERIODICALS

100,000 science fiction and mystery paperbacks, magazines, hardcovers. Free catalogs! Pandora's, Box Z-54, Neche, ND 58265-0133.

FREE CATALOG. Used hardback mystery, crime and detective books. Steve Powell, Dept. DP, The Hideaway, Bar Harbor, Maine 04609.

WORLD'S largest mystery stock. Search Service. Free catalogues. Limited Editions. Aardvarks, Box 585070, Orlando, FL 32858-5070.

MAKE YOUR CLASSIFIED AD PAY. Get "How to Write a Classified Ad That Pulls." Includes certificate worth \$5.00 towards a classified ad in this publication. Send \$3.25 (includes postage) to Davis Publications, Inc., Dept. CL, 380 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017.

FREE LIST! Used Hardcover mystery and detective fiction. Dunn's Mysteries, Box 2544, Meriden, CT 06450.

MYSTERY Addicts!! Free Catalogue!! Good, inexpensive, Recycled Detective Fiction. Grave Matters, Box 32192-C, Cincinnati, Ohio 45232.

BOOKS & PERIODICALS—Cont'd

ANNOTATED lists of new mysteries. Also used mystery catalog. Rue Morgue, 946 Pearl, Boulder, CO 80302.

FOR Details of gripping hilarious gutsy Miller Thriller books write: 18 Goodwin Street, Narabeen 2101 Australia.

MYSTERY FICTION. Free Catalogue. Write: Magna Mysteries, P.O. Box 5732, Virginia Beach, VA 23455.

BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

GOOD MONEY! Weekly! Processing Mail! Free Supplies, Postage! Bonuses! Start Immediately! Rush stamped envelope! Foodmaster-MDC, Burnt Hills, NY 12027-9983.

STAY HOME! MAKE MONEY ADDRESSING ENVELOPES. VALUABLE GENUINE OFFER. 20¢. Write Lindco, 3636-DA Peterson Ave., Chicago, IL 60659.

VENDING MACHINES. No Selling. Routes earn amazing profits. 32-page Catalogue FREE. Parkway Corporation, 1930N0 Greenspring Drive, Timonium, Maryland 21093.

BUMPERSTICKER PRINTER. Cheap, Simple, Portable. Free Details. Bumper, POB 22791(BC), Tampa, FL 33622.

PROFITABLE GOLD FOIL PRINTER. Personalize business cards, pencils, matches. Free details. Gold, P.O. Box 24986(BC), Tampa, FL 33623.

BIG PROFITS, SMALL INVESTMENT. Cash-in on the growing HOT demand for PERSONALIZED COFFEE MUGS for business & personal gifts. Our portable MUG MACHINE lets you put photos and artwork on high-profit ceramic mugs, quickly & easily. Call Ext. 440 at 800-334-0425 (in North Carolina, 800-331-4651).

EARN Hundreds Weekly. Stuffing Envelopes. Proven Successful. No Experience Necessary. Start Immediately. New Era Enterprises, M., 1589 Albion, Rexdale, Ontario M9V 1B6. Enclose a long SASE.

PLACE

CLASSIFIED

AH-JANUARY/90

To be included in the next issue please send order and remittance to I. M. Bozoki, Classified Ad Manager, DAVIS PUBLICATIONS, INC., 380 Lexington Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017.

BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES—Cont'd

READ BOOKS for pay! \$100 a title. Write: PASE-HA7, 161 Lincolnway, North Aurora, IL 60542.

MAKE \$15,000 IN 30 DAYS! EASY! NO INVESTMENT! FREE DETAILS: FINANCIAL, BOX 1150-DP, FORT. WASHINGTON, PA 19034.

SECRETS revealed! How to start/grow any business with ZERO cash. Information (stamp): Exchange-A20, 820 PCH #118, Hermosa, CA. 90254.

VENDING ROUTES earn amazing profits! Snacks, games, all types! BUY WHOLESALE DIRECT GUARANTEED! 609-866-0440.

SELL Books By Mail! \$50.00 Yearly! Free 80 Page Get Started Manual! Quality, Box 1305-PJ, Seaford, NY 11783.

BUY IT WHOLESALE

400,000 BARGAINS Below Wholesale! Many Free! Liquidations . . . Closeouts . . . Job Lots . . . Single Samples. Free Details. Worldwide Bargainhunters, Box 1409-IO, Holland MI 49424.

CLOSEOUTS! Discounts! Below wholesale! Liquidations! Freebies! All kinds! Information (Stamp): DDN, 20152-D, Ferndale, Michigan 48220.

EDUCATION & INSTRUCTION

WITCHCRAFT Occult Miracle Power Secrets Gavin and Yvonne Frost. Now accepting students. 1502-AN, Newbern, NC 28560.

"WRITE YOUR WAY TO A FORTUNE" - Turn your hobby, interest or idea into a gold mine! Free brochure. . . Saunders' Store, 123-A Bellevue Ave., Salem, VA 24153.

HIGH SCHOOL AT HOME, diploma awarded. Low tuition. Our 92nd year. Phone free, anytime 1-800-228-5600, or write American School, Dept. #322, 850 E. 58th St., Chicago, IL 60637.

FINANCIAL

VISA/MASTERCARD. NO SAVINGS REQUIRED. Bad credit no problem. Limits to \$5,000.00. Personal and business loans. 1-904-221-7139 for application, 24 hours.

FOR INVENTORS

INVENTORS! Can you patent and profit from your idea? Call AMERICAN INVENTORS CORPORATION for free information. Over a decade of service. 1-800-338-5656. In Canada call (413) 568-3753.

GIFTS THAT PLEASE

A gift sure to please—ISAAC ASIMOV's SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE, published monthly. Send \$19.50 for 13 issues (includes shipping & postage) to Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, P.O. Box 7058 Red Oak, IA 51591.

JEWELRY

CLOSEOUT JEWELRY. 55¢ Dozen. 25¢ gets catalog. ROUSSELS, 107-910 Dow, Arlington, MA 02174-7199.

LOANS BY MAIL

MONEY PROBLEMS? Write us. Immediate Loans, and Outright Grants to individuals refused elsewhere. 98% eligible! Associates-D2, C.S. 9008, Baldwin, NY 11510-9008.

SMALL Business Loans available. Call Loan Information Center (800) 727-0752 for immediate details.

LOTTERIES & SWEEPSTAKES

"BIG-Money Sweepstakes" - How to enter and win! . . . \$1 + Self-Addressed Stamped Envelope. CP Company, 11 Rushmore Ct., Sumter, SC 29154.

MAILING LISTS

NEW NAMES! Only sold once! Computerized labels! Guaranteed deliverable! DCO: 1-800-992-9405 Visa/MC/AmEx.

Classified Continued

AH-JANUARY/90

MONEYMAKING OPPORTUNITIES

READ "How to Write a Classified Ad That Pulls." Instructive booklet tells how. Also includes certificate worth \$5.00 toward a classified ad in any of our publications. For your copy, send \$3.25 (postage included) to DAVIS PUBLICATIONS, INC., Dept. CL, 380 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017.

CAN YOU STUFF 1000 envelopes for \$500.00 weekly? Send six 25¢ stamps. Blume, Box 866714, Plano, TX 75086.

GOOD MONEY! Weekly! Processing mail! Free Supplies, Postage! Bonuses! Start immediately! Rush stamped envelope! Foodmaster-DCM, Burnt Hills, NY 12027-9983.

"AMERICA'S Biggest Lie!" Believe It? NOT Believing It Can Make You Rich! Free Details From: Brady Hill & Assoc., 2681 Monroeville Blvd., Ste. 480, Monroeville, PA 15146.

READ "AMERICAN FLEA MARKET JOURNAL" for those special wholesale supply sources, profit making ideas, inside info. Year subscription (4 issues), \$10.00. Sample copy, \$3.00. Write: M.H. Sparks, 1911 Avenue D, Brownwood, Texas 76801.

HUGE PROFITS! Learn VCR Cleaning and Repair. Award-winning Video and Training Manual reveals SECRETS! Prior Experience Unnecessary. Free info: Viejo Publications, 3540 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 310, Dept. IO2, L.A., CA 90010.

1400% PROFIT - SELL 120 ROLLS KODAK FILM 12 1/2¢ roll. Certificate Book costs \$80 sells for \$15.00. Free Sample: Central Film, Box 428E, Grove City, CA 93433.

NO-Nonsense Way To \$500 a Day. \$1 + Self-Addressed Stamped Envelope: Ruby Pickering, Box 4322, E. Providence, RI 02914.

\$300 A DAY! Process Phone Orders. People Call You. Rush Stamped Envelope. CBB, Box 1109, Hazlehurst, GA 31539.

MONEYMAKING OPPORTUNITIES—Cont'd

LITTLE MONEY NEEDED to make big bucks. Start your own successful home businesses. FREE DETAILS. Evergreen Publishing, 1680 Rees Hill Rd., Salem, OR 97306.

"MAKE Your Fortune From 'Free' Government Publications." Send a SASE and \$1.00 to: Robert Bovey, 4505 Cedar Springs Road, Dallas, Texas 75219.

OUTSTANDING HOME MAILING PROGRAM! EXCEPTIONAL EARNINGS! FREE DETAILS: PREMIER MAILERS-18, BOX 26800-300, ALBUQUERQUE, NM 87125.

START Highly Profitable Envelope Stuffing Business At Home. Send \$1.00 To: Infosys-D, 3414 18th Avenue, Vernon, BC Canada V1T 1E3.

WORLDWIDE SOURCES ELECTRONICS PRODUCTS. Info: MRI, Dept.-IC, 2920 Francis, LA, CA 90005.

NEW PROCESS. Unlimited potential, no competition! Photographic Heirloom Miniatures. Every person a potential customer. Free details: Photo Treasures, Suite 1, 423 N. Lake Rd., Oconomowoc, WI 53066.

MONEYMAKER'S SECRETS! How To Write Winning Classified Ads. Simple and easy to learn - should double or triple your responses. For information write: Reliable Services, Box 36195A, Dallas, TX 75235.

MURDER MYSTERY WEEKENDS

YOU will take an active part in solving a MURDER at specially selected resorts! Call now, Toll-Free: 800-K-I-L-L-E-R-S.

OF INTEREST TO ALL

WHAT HAPPENED On Your Birthdate? Headlines, News, Sports, Pop Music. Laminated To Last. \$3.00. Joe White, 3435 So. Orange, 104T, Orlando 32806.

**YOU'LL MAKE
MONEY**

**SAVE MONEY TOO—
BY READING and ANSWERING
THESE CLASSIFIED ADS**

Classified Continued

AH-JANUARY/90

OF INTEREST TO ALL—Cont'd

HANDWRITING ANALYSIS. Discover your uniqueness \$18 (2000+ word analysis). **BIO-RHYTHMS** Learn your high-low mental, physical, emotional cycles. One year \$12. Send birthdate. Both reports \$25. Ann Jacques, #155, 1268 Main St., Tewksbury, MA 01876.

PERSONAL

SINGLE? Widowed? Divorced? Nationwide introductions! Refined, sincere people. 18-80. Identity, Box 315-DT, Royal Oak, Michigan 48068.

BEAUTIFUL GIRLS SEEK FRIENDSHIP AND MARRIAGE. American — Mexican — Philippine—European. Photo selection. **FREE!** Latins, Box 1716-DD, Chula Vista, CA 92012.

ORIENTAL ladies seeking correspondence, marriage. Presentations by American husband, Filipina wife. Asian Experience, Box 1214T, Novato, CA 94948.

BEAUTIFUL, ENGLISH SPEAKING, FILIPINAS want men of all ages as Life-partners. **VIDEOS AVAILABLE.** PAL, 51 BLANCA, CO 81123-0084.

NATIONWIDE Singles Magazine. Send Name, Address, Age. Send No Money. Exchange, 1817 Welton #1580, Denver, Colorado 80202.

BEAUTIFUL ASIAN LADIES seek life mates. **FREE** Videos, Photos. Devotion, Box 549-DP, Dublin, VA 24084-0549. (703) 674-GIRL.

PERSONAL—Cont'd

DISCOVER your true personality through Handwriting! Send Sase: Van Deursen, 6432 Juniper Rd., Port Richey, FL 34668.

SALESMEN-DISTRIBUTORS

AD SPECIALTY SALES OPENINGS. 80 Years in the Advertising Specialty and Calendar Industry have taught us the best Salespeople are Self-Starters who prefer the independence of straight commission sales over someone else calling the shots. **NEWTON MFG. CO.** offers that person the BEST Home Office Support in the industry! Ask around! Weekly Commissions, 24 Hour Toll-Free Message Center, a Generous Cash Bonus and the Top Sample Program in the Business. All orders acknowledged. Shipping Notices provided and **MUCH MORE!** No Investment, No Collections. Full or Part-Time. You're your own Boss. Contact Kevin Peska, **NEWTON MFG. CO.**, Dept. HIOC12, Newton, Iowa 50208.

SONGWRITERS

POEMS WANTED. Songs recorded and published. Radio-TV promotions. Broadway Music Productions, Box 7438-DA, Sarasota, FL 33578.

TAPES & CASSETTES

OLDTIME radio programs. Mysteries, adventure, suspense, science fiction, comedies. Classic tapes. Free catalogue. Carl D. Froelich, Heritage Farm, New Freedom, Pennsylvania 17349.

For Greater Savings...Results...and Profits...

PLACE YOUR AD IN ONE OF OUR SPECIAL COMBINATIONS:

Combo #1, Combo #2, or Combo #3.

Each combination is designed to give your ad the largest audience available.

Each combination offers you a Special Discount Rate.

For further information write to I. M. Bozoki, Classified Ad Manager,
Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017.

MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

▼ OUR EXCLUSIVE MAIL-ORDER INTRODUCTION



It's a toss-up as to whether it's kids or parents who are happiest with this very special Child's Chair. From the tyke's point of view, it's great because it pulls right up to a real table (fits under standard dining tables of 27 $\frac{1}{4}$ " or higher). Children can feel part of family meals when not relegated to a highchair, plus a table is better than that little tray for food plus the requisite toys. Older toddlers are particularly pleased with what resembles a "grown-up" chair. Adults love the quality — American-made of solid $\frac{3}{4}$ " oak, double-lacquered for protection, plus the safety features — all edges rounded, all screws recessed, polypropylene straps attached with screws and washers. Designed for durability (nylon gliders instead of casters that fall off; no upholstery to replace), it's been extensively tested in restaurants, where there's more abuse than even *your* kids can dish out. Since there's nothing like a highchair for spoiling your decor the very best feature may be the handsome styling. 18"x20" at base. **\$85.98** (\$10.00) #A1792.

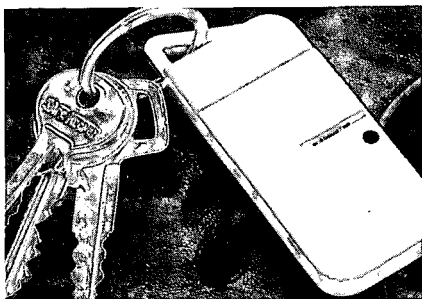


▼ YOUR FACE WILL THINK YOU'VE BEEN TO A LUXURY SPA

Some of the world's most famous professional salons rely on the deep-cleaning and rejuvenating effects of facial steaming. Accomplishing it at home has meant leaning over a stove under a towel tent — and who can be bothered? Now, there's the Episauna — just fill with tap water, plug in, flip up the hood to a comfortable angle and enjoy the warm, soothing mist. Tense facial muscles relax, nature's own perspiration system is stimulated to open and clean pores; built-up cosmetics and grime disappear. Use with your favorite cream and see its effects multiplied — dry, even over-sunned or chapped skin — can benefit. With hood flipped down, Episauna is just 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ " tall, for easy storing or packing. Even adjusts for foreign voltages automatically. U.L. listed, doubles as a vaporizer/inhaler for nasal congestion. **\$39.98** (\$4.00) #A1862.

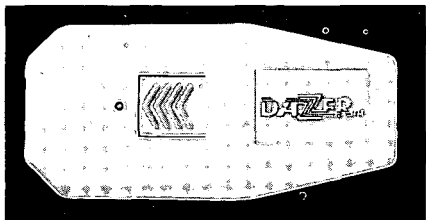


▼ EASY KEY FINDER



Key is misplaced more often than any other modern essential. Now thanks to our easy key finder your keys can tell you where you put them. Clap your hands 4 times and it will chirp electronically. Works up to 30' away. Special hybrid microchip design requires no on/off switch (other units need you to turn them ON before you lose your keys). This unit has a high-impact plastic case; weighs a mere 1/2oz; comes with its own key ring; measures only 2 1/2" x 1 1/8" x 3/8". Batteries and a 30-day manufacturer's warranty are included. **\$13.98** (\$3.00) #A1889; two units, **\$23.98** (\$4.00) #A1890.

▼ HELPFUL TO HUMANS HARMLESS TO DOGS



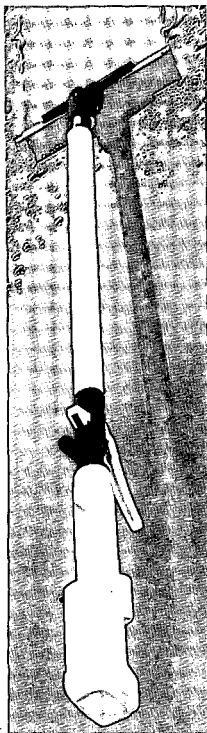
Even the most dedicated canine aficionado can sometimes encounter unfriendly dogs. Dazer™ provides a humane way to repel their advance, emitting ultrasonic sound waves inaudible to humans and totally safe for dogs (unlike mace and other common deterrents). Pocket size (4 3/4" long) plastic case can also clip on belt; takes 1-9V battery, included. For joggers, hikers, bikers, seniors and kids—plus the proverbial postman. **\$29.98**, (\$3.00) #A1829X.

▼ YES, IT DOES WINDOWS — IN HALF THE TIME

Do we exaggerate? Actually, it may take *less* than half the time you'd normally spend assembling, toting and juggling bottles or buckets, rags, a hose, a stepstool. Spray & Wipe™ combines in one implement an ample reservoir for your cleaning fluid, a spray trigger at the base and adjustable mist-to-spray head at top, plus a squeegee. At 34" long, it eliminates much climbing; is lightweight but sturdy for firm leverage on the squeegee; swivel head reaches angles. Think patio doors, shower stalls, boats, campers, windshields, et al.

\$15.98 (\$4.00)

#A1865X.



HOW TO ORDER

CALL TOLL FREE, 24 HOURS A DAY,
7 DAYS A WEEK

1-800-365-8493

CUSTOMER SERVICE CALL 201-367-2900

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED

**30 Day Money Back Guarantee For
Exchange or Refund**

WE ACCEPT MASTERCARD/VISA

If ordering by mail send remittance to **MAIL ORDER MALL**, Dept. 010 HK; P.O. Box 3006, Lakewood, N.J. 08701. Item price is followed by shipping and handling in (). Be sure to add both together to arrive at total price. N.J. residents add 6% sales tax. When using credit card — include account number, exp. date, signature. Sorry, no Canadian, foreign or C.O.D. orders.

Magalog Marketing Group Inc. © 1989

1905 Swarthmore Ave, Lakewood, N.J. 08701

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MAIL ☆ ORDER ☆ MALL

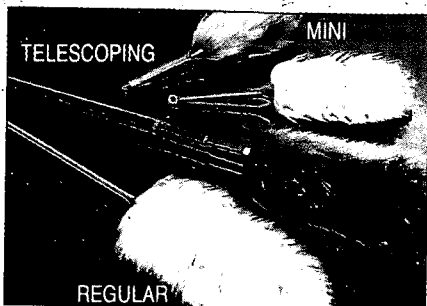
▽ YOGURT CHEESE FUNNEL & RECIPE BOOK



In less than a minute, you can make the newest, healthiest most economical spread — just spoon plain yogurt into this woven plastic funnel, place in the frig, in 8-14 hrs. you have really creamy cheese. Using 1½% milkfat yogurt, it has 90% less fat, ⅓ calories but over twice the calcium of commercial cream cheese. Yet most people including avowed yogurt haters can't tell the difference! Use the 142 page recipe book included or substitute for cream cheese, mayonnaise, or sour cream in your favorite recipes! Funnel holds up to 16oz. Makes about 8oz. of yogurt cheese. Our set provides 142 page recipe book, 1 funnel, you'll have enough for the lemon cheesecake shown above — scrumptious and a mere 125 calories. **\$26.98** (\$5.00) #A1892.

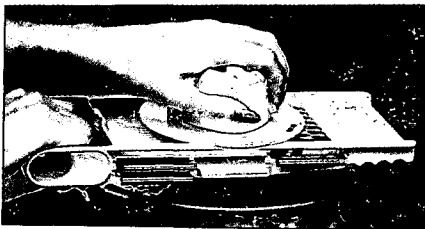


▽ DUST MAGNETS



Lambswool contains a natural static charge that makes dust literally leap off surfaces. Our dusters are imported from England. They are the fluffiest, highest quality lambswool in the world! We offer a set of four lambswool dusters: our 27" duster, our telescoping duster which extends to more than four feet — lets you reach high corners, top shelves, overhead lights and collapses to 28", and two mini dusters for extra fragile objects. **\$22.98** (\$4.00) #A1870.

▽ GOOD NATURED GRATER



The Leifheit 4-in-1 grater is a sure-grip food holder that lets you work at top speed with no fear of flaying your fingers. Molded hand-grip gives sure control, indentations seat the grater securely atop bowls from 4½" to 9½" diameter. Blades are stainless steel, store right in grater frame, and provide choice of small and large shredders, medium grater, and ground-edge slicer. The unit itself is made of tough ABS plastic, dishwasher safe. Imported from West Germany. It's the first truly civilized grater we've seen. **\$22.98** (\$4.25) #A1910.

HOW TO ORDER

CALL TOLL FREE, 24 HOURS A DAY,
7 DAYS A WEEK

1-800-365-8493

CUSTOMER SERVICE CALL 201-367-2900

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED

**30 Day Money Back Guarantee For
Exchange or Refund**

WE ACCEPT MASTERCARD/VISA

If ordering by mail send remittance to **MAIL ORDER MALL**, Dept:010,HK, P.O. Box 3006, Lakewood, N.J. 08701. Item price is followed by shipping and handling in (). Be sure to add both together to arrive at total price. N.J. residents add 6% sales tax. When using credit card — include account number, exp. date, signature. Sorry, no Canadian, foreign or C.O.D. orders.

Magalog Marketing Group Inc. © 1989

1905 Swarthmore Ave., Lakewood, N.J. 08701